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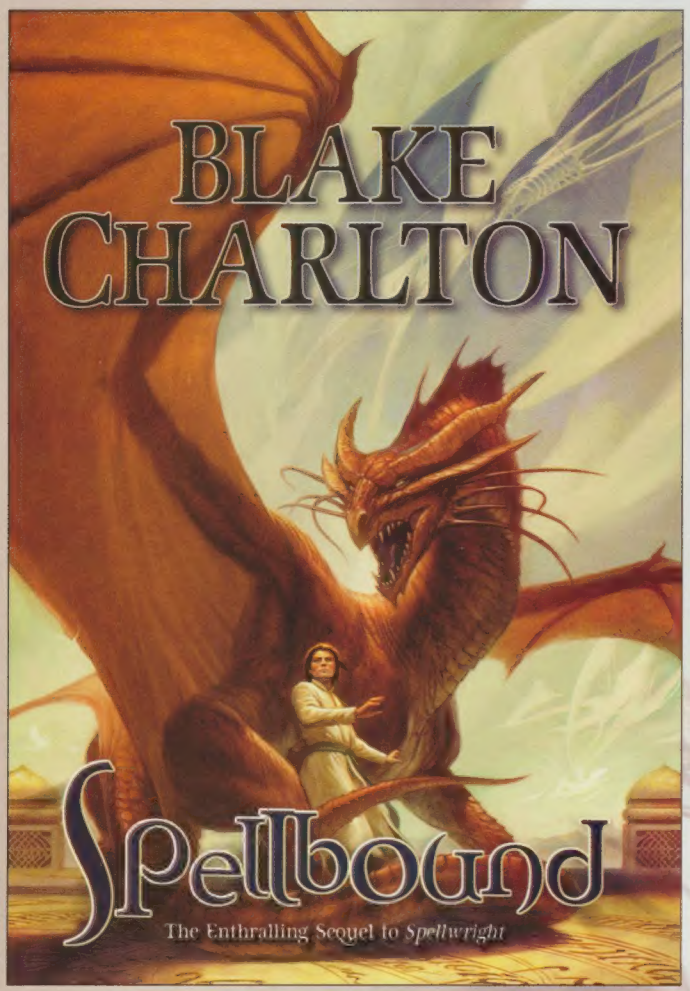

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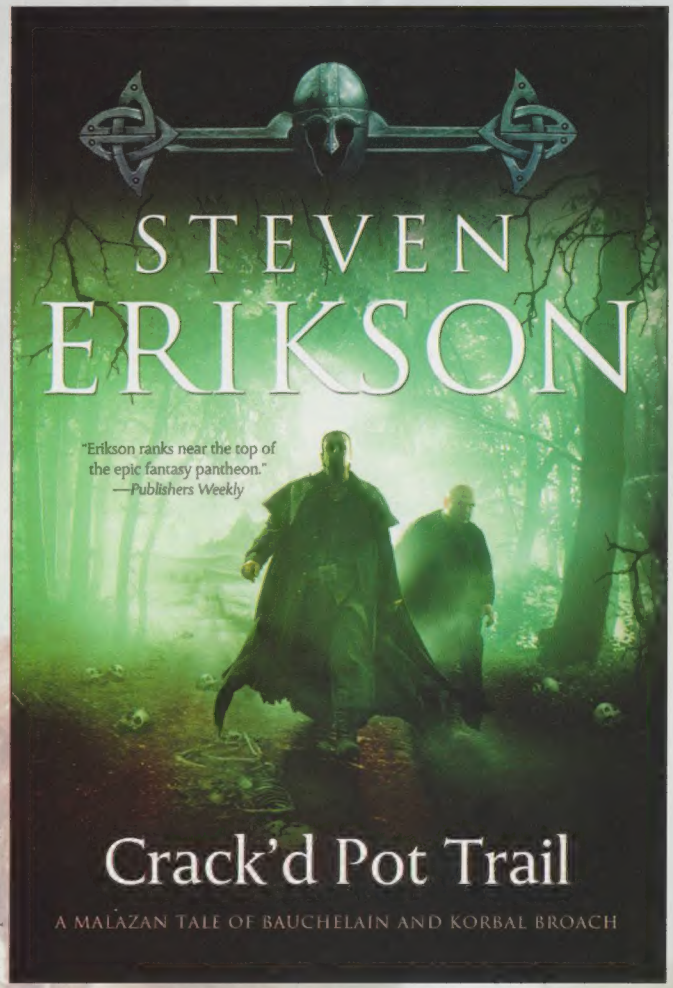
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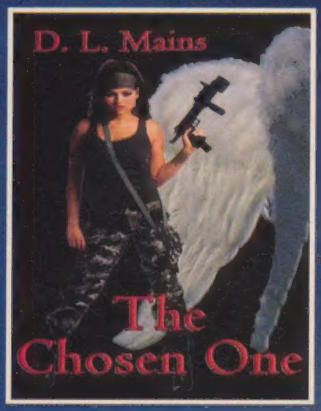

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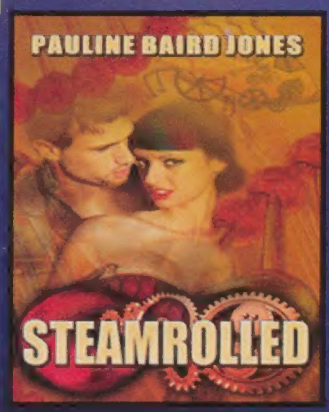

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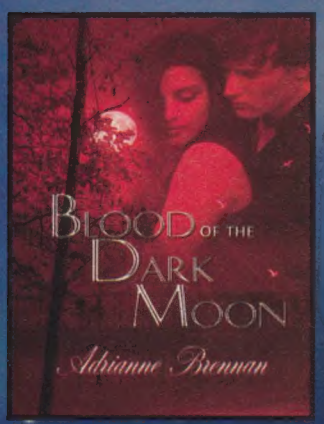

Amanda, graduate student and devoted follower of the Greek god Apollo, is intrigued when she meets Jesse, a handsome young scholar who shares her love of both the classics and the occult. He quickly sparks her interest-and ignites a dark flame of passion between them. Together, they embark on a shadowy path that leads Amanda straight into Jesse's scintillating underworld of vampires, magick, and secret societies. Little does Amanda know she is about to fulfil a legacy that began over thirty years ago and ended in tragedy. Can she learn the truth about her identity in time to help those whom she has grown to care about and find happiness in her new life with Jesse? Blood of the Dark Moon combines the classic eroticism of vampires with a touch of modern sensual romance and occult intrigue.

Blood of the Dark Moon
by Adrianne Brennan
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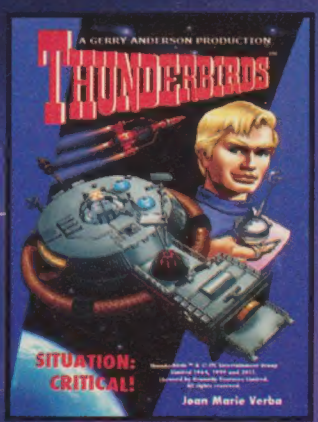

John Tracy, the third of Jeff Tracy's sons, coordinates communications for International Rescue on the space satellite Thunderbird 5, in addition to piloting the rocket ship Thunderbird 3 and assisting with Earth-based rescues. An experienced astronomer, John discovers a new system and realizes its gravity has sent meteors and comets hurtling toward Earth. John and the rest of the International Rescue team find that this is only the beginning of the disasters they must handle, which affect them as well as the rest of the world. Can they save the Earth, and themselves, from catastrophe?

Thunderbirds Situation Critical
by Joan Marie Verba
ISBN-10: 098252322X
ISBN-13: 978-0982523223

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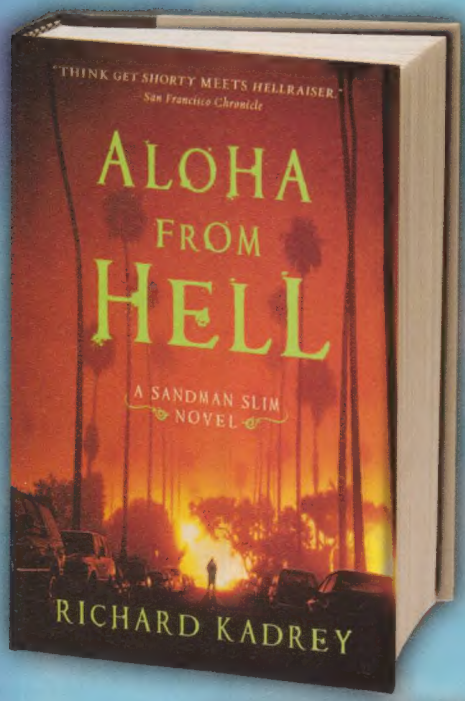

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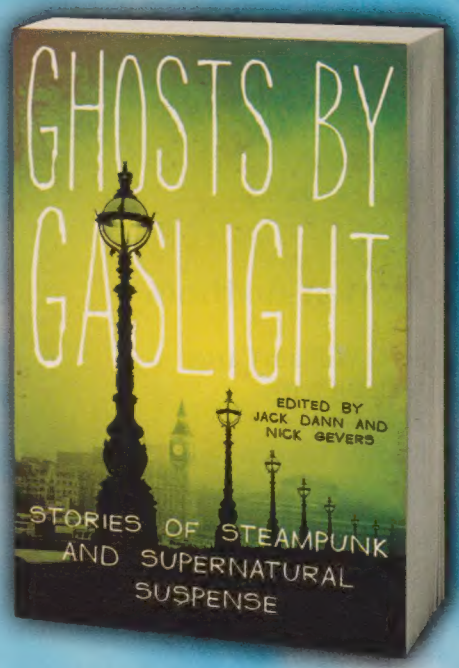

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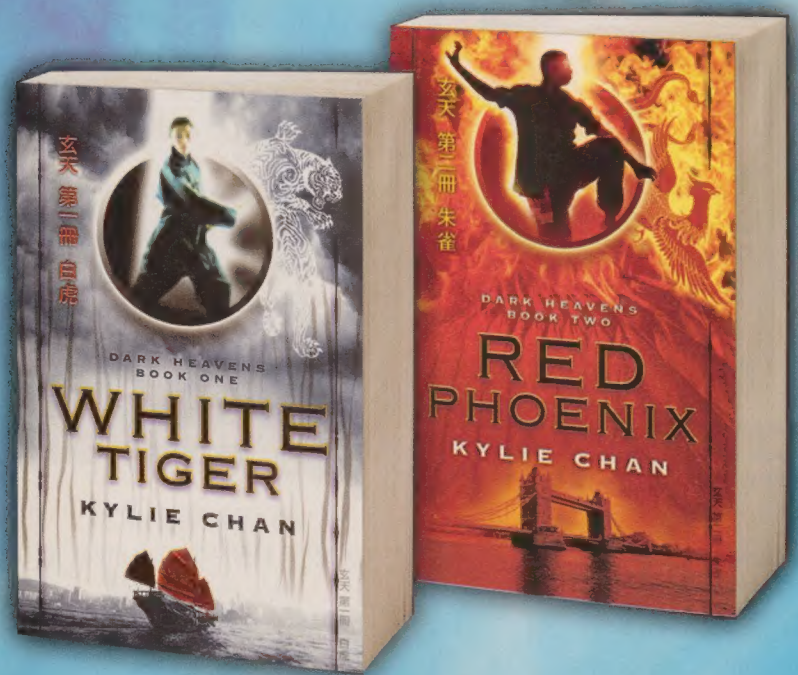

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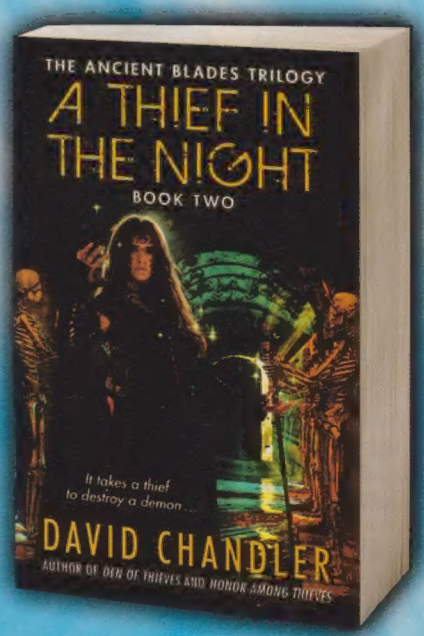
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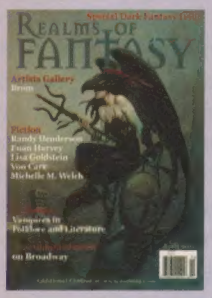

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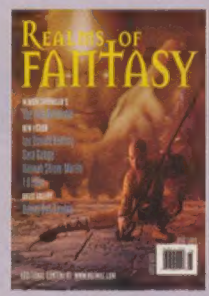

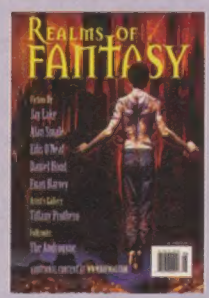

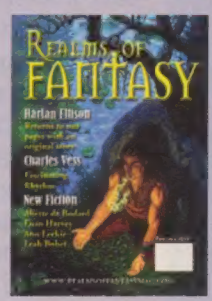

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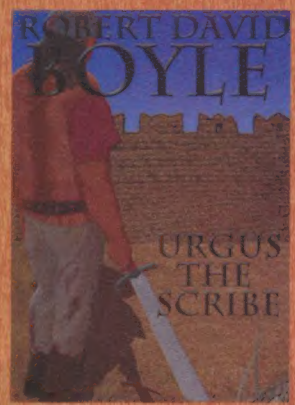

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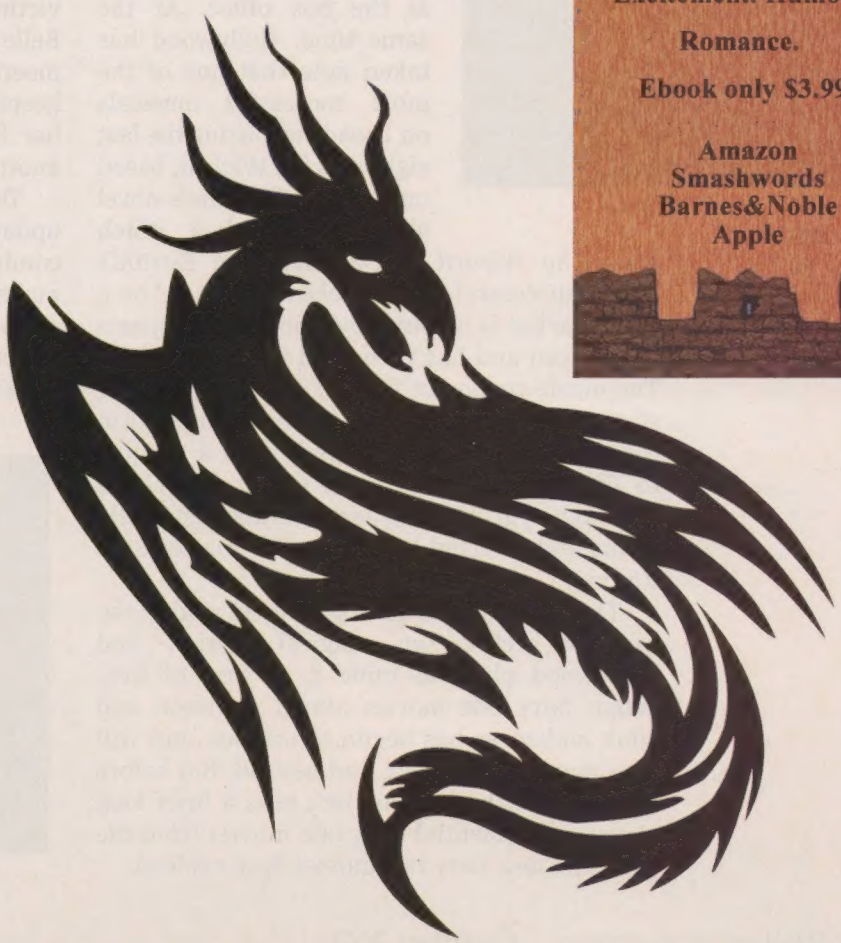


Movies

Fairy Tale Mania: Get Ready for a New Wave of Movies Inspired by Fairy Tales

by Resa Nelson

Throughout the history of film, fairy tales have provided inspiration for film versions of the beloved stories we've heard since childhood. Suddenly, Hollywood is embracing fairy tales to the extreme. Some speculate Tim Burton's remake of *Alice in Wonderland* planted the seed for a new wave of fairy tale movies. Burton's *Alice* grossed a billion dollars worldwide and knocked *Avatar* out of theaters when it still had a strong foothold. Others guess that studios are looking for ready-made ideas that they can tweak for modern audiences. It probably doesn't hurt that by winning the Oscar for Best Picture, *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* proved that fantasy movies can achieve both critical and financial success. And then 2007's *Enchanted* proved that a live-action blend of fairy tales and present-day life could be a big winner at the box office. At the same time, Hollywood has taken note that one of the most successful musicals on Broadway during the last eight years is *Wicked*, based on Gregory Maguire's novel about the Wicked Witch from *The Wizard of Oz*. Like Tim Burton's hugely successful *Alice*, *Wicked* isn't based on a fairy tale but is inspired by a book that appeals to children and has withstood the test of time. The movie version of *Wicked* is in the planning stage and could be released sometime within the next several years. There's even a prequel to *The Wizard of Oz* in the works: *The Great and Powerful*, starring James Franco and Mila Kunis and directed by horror film master Sam Raimi.

La Belle et la Bête

The point is this: there's plenty of gold in the hills of well-known magical stories, and Hollywood plans to mine it. A slew of live-action fairy tale movies aimed at tween and adult audiences has begun to roll out, and will continue in 2012, 2013, and beyond. But before delving into those films, let's take a brief look at several influential fairy tale movies from the past, and how fairy tale movies have evolved.

Many movies that simply retold popular fairy tales were made from the era of silent films to the mid-twentieth century. These included Disney's early efforts, beginning in 1950 with *Cinderella* (if you don't count 1940's *Fantasia*). Considering the era, it's no surprise that fairy tale heroines typically are portrayed as victims in these early films: a young woman faces a life as a servant until she marries a wealthy prince who can save her from poverty and drudgery. In a time during American history when women had few choices, it's small wonder that fairy tale movies reflected a woman's lot in life as that of a victim.

But by the middle of the century, fairy tale movies took an artistic turn. In 1946, French director Jean Cocteau raised the bar when he turned Madame Leprince de Beaumont's story about a merchant's daughter and a monster into *La Belle et la Bête*, also known as *Beauty and the Beast*. Considered to be the most faithful adaptation, Cocteau created an ethereal and often creepy atmosphere with simple camera tricks and special effects. He also made Belle's ethics the centerpiece of the story. Unlike the victim heroines of early Disney and other films, Belle has known both wealth and poverty before meeting the beast. Her struggle is between keeping her word to the beast and concern for her father's health, all while learning to love another for his character instead of his looks.

Two years later, in 1948, a British film told an updated version of *The Red Shoes* and successfully combined ballet with a fairy tale story, which makes sense because many successful ballets are based on fairy tales. Like *La Belle et la Bête* (whose star was an experienced dancer), *The Red Shoes* is an art-house movie with a dreamlike

The Red Shoes

quality. It centers around a ballet based on the fairy tale and the ballet company that produces it. Actor and dancer Moira Shearer plays Victoria, a young ballerina who is soon discovered and mentored as she begins a stellar career. Dance is so important to her that she can't imagine living without it. Considering this movie was made in the 1940's, its story is remarkably ahead of its time: when she falls in love with the ballet company's music conductor and composer, Victoria is faced with a heart-breaking decision. Should she marry the man she loves and follow him as he pursues his career beyond the ballet company, or should she give him up to do the work that makes her happy? Victoria finds herself trapped in that decision, and the film suggests that, as they did in the original fairy tale, the red ballet shoes she wears take on a life of their own and guide Victoria to her fate.

Danny Kaye in
Hans Christian Andersen

These two European films very likely influenced American filmmakers. Four years later, in 1952, Danny Kaye (*White Christmas)* starred in the American film *Hans Christian Andersen*, a self-described "fairy tale about Andersen" instead of a bio-pic. Although appropriate for children, this Hollywood musical is a surprisingly sophisticated and adult story about love and delusion. Following the lead of *The Red Shoes*, Andersen meets and falls in love with a ballerina, mistakenly believing her marriage has placed her in danger. Desperate to help, Andersen writes "The Little Mermaid" and sends it to her with the hope she'll see the light and leave her husband, only to see his story turned into a ballet in which she stars. Like *The Red Shoes*, "The Little Mermaid" is a ballet within the movie that's packed with fantasy and great visual effects. The film's poignant and emotionally complex climax raised the bar even higher for fairy tale movies.

It took a few decades for fairy tale movies to catch up with the feminist movement. *The Company of Wolves* (1984) is an early film by Neil Jordan (*The Crying Game*). Jordan co-wrote the script with Angela Carter, whose short stories inspired the movie. Although disjointed, thanks to an awkward stories-within-a-story framework, this movie took a solid step toward empowering fairy tale heroines.

Maybe it's no coincidence that in 1989 Disney launched its reinvention of classic fairy tales with *The Little Mermaid.* Reflecting the post-feminist era, Disney heroines have become girls with dreams of their own and a real sense of identity instead of victims longing to be rescued. Some have even become Broadway musicals, including *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast.*

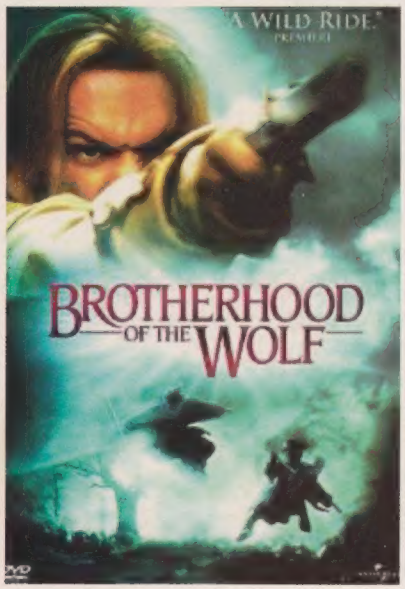
In 1997 a TV movie called *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* took the fairy tale into Grimm territory. Although not completely faithful to the original story, the liberty it takes makes the story more realistic and examines the character of the evil stepmother. Sigourney Weaver stars as Lady Claudia (a woman who marries the father of Snow White), and she received Emmy and SAG nominations for this role. Claudia has a mysterious past and an equally mysterious, mute brother. It seems their mother was killed for being a witch, and part of Claudia's inheritance is an enormous wardrobe that contains a mystical mirror. When she first marries Snow White's father, Claudia comes across as a woman who wants to fit in. She struggles for years to bear her own child only to end up barren after a stillbirth, which acts as the catalyst for her slow descent into madness. Claudia gives *Psycho*'s Norman Bates a run for

The Company of Wolves

his money, making this version of Snow White a true horror film. Even though many of the details of the story are different than those in the fairy tale, it succeeds in spirit.

A year later, Drew Barrymore brought Cinderella up to date in 1998's intelligent and charming *Ever After*. Again, it's a movie that takes several liberties with the original fairy tale, but the risk pays off in a warm-hearted and satisfying story about a woman who decides what she wants in life. Like other movies in the 1980s and 1990s, it expanded ways for fairy tales to be filmed as current and relevant stories.

Although 2001's *Brotherhood of the Wolf*, a French film directed by Christophe Gans (*Silent Hill*), is based on truth instead of fiction, it has the sense and sensibilities of a fairy tale and may have provided a strong influence for upcoming movies. In 1764, an unknown beast terrorized the region of Gevaudan, killing scores of people instead of attacking livestock as a wolf would do. The movie version of the event is about a Frenchman and his Native American friend as they lead a hunt to stop the beast, using slick martial arts when needed. Witches are suspect, and fairy tale elements weave in and out of the story. This movie updates period fantasy with the kind of fresh energy that's spilling into today's fairy tale films.



Brotherhood of the Wolf

The *Shrek* series struck gold during the past ten years and launched a new fairy tale trend: crafting animated movies that draw upon a wide range of popular fairy tale characters while captivating children and adults alike with pinpoint precision humor. Based on the books by William Steig, the first movie took the unexpected and clever step of taking the traditional story of a beast who longs to return to his human form and turning that story on its head. After four *Shrek* movies, the creators spun off one of the most popular characters in his own movie: *Puss in Boots* (2011). Many other studios have attempted to copy the *Shrek* approach of making animated movies that adults are likely to enjoy as much as children but they pale in comparison.

During the past decade, Hollywood offered a few fairy tale updates that don't seem to know whether they're for very young audiences (based on the very broad humor in these films) or for teens (based on the suggestiveness that earned them a PG-13 rating). Who knows? Maybe it was an attempt to find the magic formula for a tween audience that the *Twilight* series has captured. *A Cinderella Story* (2004) and *Sydney White* (2007) retell the classic stories of Cinderella and Snow White. In each movie, the main character is a high school or college student who lost her mother in childhood and whose father raised her as a tomboy. In each movie, the heroine is an outcast: a "diner girl" waitress shunned by the popular crowd in *A Cinderella Story* and a sorority reject who befriends seven geeky college boys in *Sydney White*. These films excel in the way they broadly portray cliques and communicate the message that outcasts are better off in their own peculiar worlds than trying to fit in. These fairy tale movies, although not as elegant or richly emotional as Disney movies like *Beauty and the Beast*, accomplish the same task of showing girls that in a place where stereotypes and cruelty are rewarded, it's okay to be smart and resourceful and kind.

Today's new trend of fairy tale movies began earlier this year with the release of *Beastly* in March followed by *Red Riding Hood* one week later. Although both movies have strengths, they also have weaknesses that kept them from winning over critics or moviegoers in huge numbers. Following the trend of the past decade, these films seem geared toward tween audiences but slide down a slippery slope. In *Beastly*, neither the beauty nor the beast bats an eye when her father commits cold-blooded murder, making the main characters come across as weak-minded and difficult to like. (Don't blame novelist Alex Flinn, whose novel inspired the movie. Flinn does a superb job of creating likable characters that have their heads on straight. Too bad the filmmakers failed to follow in her footsteps.) While *Red Riding Hood* sports some great visuals and interesting ideas, its ending feels like a weak attempt to emulate

Beastly

Red Riding Hood

the *Twilight* series. This might have something to do with the fact that its director is *Twilight* director Catherine Hardwicke.

Despite a slow start out of the gate, the fairy tale movies scheduled for release in 2012 and beyond hold promise in that they feature Oscar-winning actors and directors who have proven themselves as visionaries in the fantasy and horror genres. It very well could be that the best is yet to come. And if these upcoming live action fairy tale movies succeed, they could pave the way for more.

Currently slated for release in March 2012 is *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters*, starring Jeremy Renner (Oscar nominee for Best Actor in *Hurt Locker*) as Hansel. Described as a blend of comedy, action, and horror, this film tells the story of brother and sister, Hansel and Gretel, about fifteen years after they escape nearly being eaten by a witch in the forest. Their terrifying ordeal now informs their professional lives: they have become bounty hunters who capture witches. The casting of Renner could give this film the edge it needs, thanks to the smart choices he's made in accepting roles, indicating he has a good eye for promising scripts. Earlier this year, he earned another Oscar nomination for his portrayal of a Boston bank robber in *The Town*. Odds are he'll bring an edgy reality to the role of Hansel.

Jack the Giant Killer is currently scheduled for release in June 2012, and it comes with an even more impressive pedigree. It's directed by Bryan Singer, best known for *The Usual Suspects*. Also on board is screenwriter Christopher McQuarrie, who scripted *The Usual Suspects*, making this a proven filmmaking team. And then there's the cast: Nicholas Hoult (*About a Boy, X-Men: First Class*) plays Jack and is joined by cast mates Ian McShane (TV's *Deadwood*), Ewan McGregor (the *Star Wars* movies), Bill Nighy (*Shaun of the Dead*, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series), and Warwick Davis (*Willow*, the *Harry Potter* series). The story is about a young farmer, Jack, who leads an expedition to rescue a princess from the kingdom of the giants, which threatens to break a long-standing peace between humans and giants. But like *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters*, this new version of Jack and the Beanstalk is likely to be dark and gritty.

Rounding out the upcoming fairy tale movies are three different versions of Snow White. (The release dates are being shuffled like cards and may keep changing. The following dates are current at press time.) First is *Snow White and the Huntsman*, scheduled for release on June 1, 2012. This story focuses on the relationship Snow White develops with the huntsman ordered by the evil queen to take Snow White into the woods in order to kill her. Instead, the huntsman lets her go and they must escape together. Oscar winner Charlize Theron (*Monster*) plays the Evil Queen, and Kristen Stewart (the *Twilight* series) stars as Snow White. Chris Hemsworth, who shined as the star of *Thor* earlier this year, plays the huntsman. (Shortly before press time, *Entertainment Weekly* reported that *Snow White and the Huntsman* is being made into a trilogy. In other words, expect to see a total of *five* Snow White movies during the next few years: the three different versions, plus the final two films in the *Huntsman* series.)

Snow White Tale of Terror

Four weeks later (June 29, 2012) is the tentatively titled *The Brothers Grimm: Snow White*, which stars Oscar winner Julia Roberts (*Erin Brockovich*) and Nathan Lane (*The Producers*). Although the title refers to a classic version of this story, don't hold your breath. In this story the kingdom has been destroyed, and Snow White and the seven dwarfs plot to reclaim it. Described as an adventure/comedy,

Sydney White

it's directed by visionary Tarsem Singh, best known for *The Cell*, a disturbing but often visually beautiful horror film.

The final Snow White movie is a Disney live-action film called *Snow and the Seven*, with shooting scheduled to begin in China later this year and a release sometime in 2013. Instead of classic fairy tale, think martial arts epic with seven Shaolin monks instead of dwarfs. Director Yuen Woo-ping acted as the fight choreographer for the *Matrix* trilogy and *Kill Bill*, but it's likely *Snow and the Seven* may have the same dreamy feel as his best known movie, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Even better, chalk up the screenplay to Nebula, Hugo, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Michael Chabon.

In the midst of this onslaught of fairy tale movies, two TV networks have hopped on the enchanted bandwagon. At press time, ABC

***Once Upon a Time* on ABC**

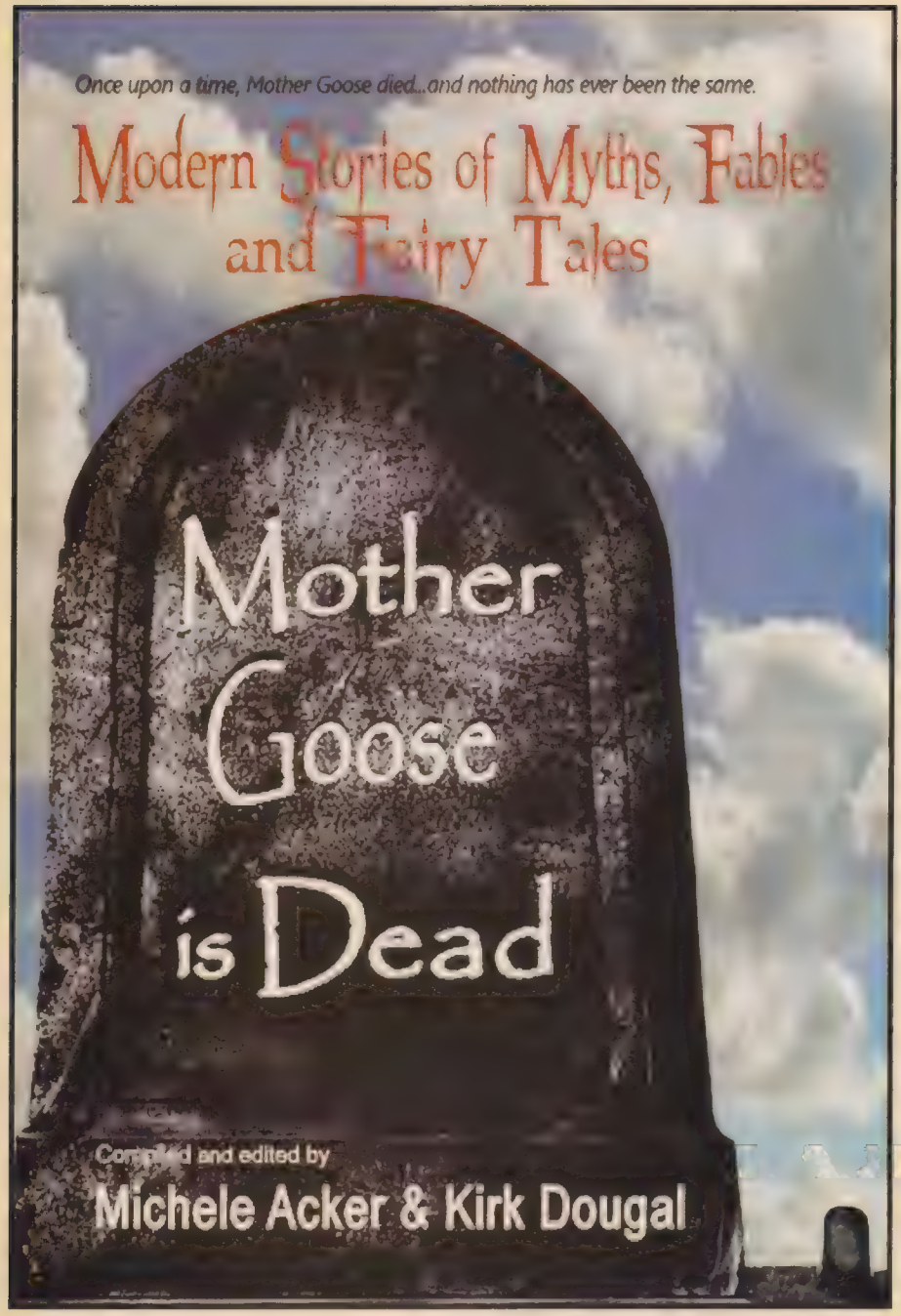
scheduled a new TV series, *Once Upon a Time*, to debut this fall. Sandwiched between *America's Funniest Videos* and *Desperate Housewives* on Sunday nights, *Once Upon a Time* tells the tale of Emma Swan (played by Jennifer Morrison of TV's *House*), a twenty-eight-year-old bail bondsman who was abandoned as an infant. Ironically, when she's an adult she gives up her own son. Now ten years old, he tracks her down and claims that Emma is the daughter of fairy tale characters Snow White and Prince Charming, who sent Emma away in order to protect her from the curse of an evil queen, which has brought fairy tales to life in the town of Storybrooke. Like Emma, the people who inhabit Storybrooke don't know their true identity as fairy tale characters. If viewers give *Once Upon a Time* a chance, it might prove to be worthwhile. After all, its executive producers and writers come from *Lost*.

Grimm, a new series airing on NBC on Fridays after *Chuck*, looks to be even more promising. Executive producers David Greenwalt (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) and Jim

***Grimm* on NBC**

Kouf (*National Treasure*) both worked on *Angel*, so maybe a little bit of that Joss Whedon magic rubbed off. *Grimm*'s premise is that a selected few have the ability to see the monsters that walk among us, and fairy tales aren't just stories. They really happened, and they continue to happen in our day and age even though most of us don't recognize them for what they really are. This new series combines police work with fantasy, and could be one of the most unique shows we've seen in years.

If you're a fan of fairy tales and are open to seeing them reinterpreted, keep your eyes open. The next few years could get interesting.


Once upon a time, Mother Goose died...and nothing has ever been the same.
Modern Stories of Myths, Fables and Fairy Tales
Mother Goose is Dead
Compiled and edited by
Michele Acker & Kirk Dougal

Mother Goose is Dead

Modern Stories of Myths, Fables and Fairy Tales

Once upon a time Mother Goose died, and things have never been the same.

She helped raise children for more than 300 years; her stories, along with myths and legends, taught each generation morals and life lessons. But something happened over the centuries.
Mother Goose died.

Now the tales have been retold in different ways, twisted in on themselves, or added to with completely new stories.

Mother Goose is Dead delivers those tales, showing how they may not have been quite the way they seemed when readers were children, how they could have turned out differently, or even what came next after the "happily ever after."

Laugh along as you read about how some of those fairy tale characters run scams on unsuspecting humans, Detective Prince Charming figures out what really happened in the Case of Hansel and Gretel, or how the Grim Reaper has updated with the times.

The tales grow darker and the stakes higher as old familiar stories are stretched, skewed, and twisted to the point of breaking. Find out that Peter the Pumpkin Eater raised more than just vegetables, the feud between wolves and pigs runs deeper than anyone knows, Alice's fall down the rabbit hole was not all it appeared, and good help is hard to find—even for the Tooth Fairy. See what happened after Snow White married the Prince, the price a man pays for speaking his mind, the consequences for stealing a person's life, and if the Wicked Witch of the West is really dead. Discover what could have happened if the Prince never awakened Sleeping Beauty, how modern day elves help people, where children's fears of the dark really come from, how far a man will let his greed take him, how fairies face their own Apocalypse, and how two women remain themselves and don't become what society thinks they should be.

Finally, see how new tales show a sultan's son discovering purpose in his life, a man earns a second chance, a woman finds her own worth within herself, vengeance is dealt by the wronged, and how the future of the world was saved long ago.

Yes, Mother Goose may be dead, but the stories live on.

Authors include Aaron Polson, Amelia Mangan, J.B. Dane , Bob Nailor, Eric Diehl, Jason Lavertue , Jeff Houser, Shelle Klein, Jodi Ralston, Jon C. Crusoe, Karina Fabian, Kim Richards, Kirk Dougal, Klaus Mundt, Bridges DelPonte, Cate Karin, Margaret McGaffey Fisk, Michelle Klein, Mike Rimar, Patricia A. Schiml, Rob Rosen, Barry Napier, Scott Virtes, Steven Westcott, Joette Rozanski, and Michele Acker.

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Artists Gallery

Ruth Sanderson: Artful Words and Images

by Karen Haber

Ruth Sanderson is one busy artist. When she's not writing and illustrating children's fantasy books she's coordinating the development of apps for her books, or designing puzzlebooks, or licensing her work for greeting cards and collectors' plates. Or, she might be finishing up a sculpture for a library, or preparing for a Guest of Honor gig at the World Fantasy Convention or for a solo show of her work at the Norman Rockwell Museum.

Over three decades, she's illustrated more than eighty books, written and illustrated a dozen more, and among her many awards are the 1980 National Science Teachers Award for *Five Nests,* the 1992 Young Hoosier Award for *The Enchanted Wood,* the 1994 Irma S. Black Award for *The Enchanted Wood,* the Oppenheimer Toy Portfolio Award for *The Crystal Mountain,* and the 2003 Texas Bluebonnet Award for *The Golden Mare, the Firebird, and the Magic Ring.*

A Massachusetts resident, Ruth grew up in a small town where she engaged her imagination in the woods around her home, the library where her grandmother was the librarian, and in an abandoned amusement park near her best friend's house.

On her website, the artist shares insight into the beginning of her artistic journey: "One of the most magical places in the woods near [my friend's] house was an abandoned theme park. At the end of the long, tree-lined road a pink castle loomed. Of course it was locked, but it was easy to get into the old park through the woods. Inside were many buildings in miniature, big enough to stand inside, but small.... My favorite was a fieldstone cottage—probably intended as a fairy-tale house.... The combination of my love of fairy tales and actually getting to play in a magical fairy-tale playland, overgrown and mysterious, without a doubt had a profound effect on the direction of my life."

Ruth attended the Paier School of Art in Connecticut, graduating in 1974. From there she moved on to interior illustrations for children's textbooks, and book covers. Her big break came when she was asked to illustrate an edition of *Heidi* that required 100 full-color paintings. The generous deadline allowed her to move from quick-drying media—watercolors, airbrush, acrylics—to her favorite medium, oils. She began to illustrate fairy tales, beginning with *Sleeping Beauty,* and became interested in writing as well as painting. Her first effort was *The Twelve Dancing Princesses,* was published in 1990. She has since written and illustrated twelve of her own books. Today she writes, paints, and works in varied media, both digital and traditional. Ruth will be the Artist Guest of Honor at this year's World Fantasy Convention in San Diego, California. She recently took time out of her busy schedule to answer some questions for Realms of Fantasy.

* * *

Cinderella
oils 14 x 20"

ROF: You've worn—and wear—many different artistic hats. What is your favorite "hat," and why?

RS: Author/Illustrator is my favorite "hat." Writing and illustrating have the same goal—to communicate, whether in words or pictures, an idea, an emotion, a story. Retelling and illustrating fairy tales has given me the opportunity to personally interpret these stories in writing, design, and illustration. In connecting with these timeless tales I am not really creating stories and art for children, but for myself, and for anyone of any age who resonates with what I've communicated.

Many fairy tales are "coming of age" stories, like *Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast,* and *The Twelve Dancing Princesses.* They can be read on many levels, often dealing with archetypal themes and rites of passage. I feel that an entertaining fantasy story with symbolic and mythic elements can nourish our souls more

The Magnificent Wilf
oils 30 x 40"

Prospero
oils 16 x 20"

than a realistic story, and help us face the dark woods we all must pass through in our lives.

Children hearing fairy tales learn there are scary woods, evil creatures, and impossible tasks, but with a bit of help the worthy protagonist—usually the youngest—does succeed. My original fairy tale, *The Enchanted Wood,* takes on these themes, and I wrote it to be a rite-of-passage story for boys in particular, as most of my previous books were "girl" stories.

ROF: Do you have a preferred subject?

RS: I have always preferred drawing and painting natural subjects as opposed to man-made ones. I feel more rooted in the past than interested in the present or future. And for me, a princess in a long brocade dress is way more interesting to paint than a modern girl in jeans. In fairy tales, my favorite stories are of quests and heroes/heroines, impossible tasks, and magical helpers, and in the end, happiness won through sacrifice. Because I work realistically, I take pictures of models in costume, with very specific lighting effects. And I've got a huge library of reference books and a filing cabinet full of picture reference. I might pull 100 pieces of reference for one painting.

I enjoy painting fantasy subjects because these are things seen with the inner eye, and to attempt to bring them to life in a painting is an exciting challenge. Though I enjoy doing an occasional "straight" landscape painting or portrait, I prefer to paint places that are imaginary, with elements that are mythic, magical, and/or symbolic.

If I had to pick a favorite subject, it would have to be trees and the woods. I have always felt an affinity toward old venerable trees and get very upset when I see them being cut down to widen roads, etc. I enjoy creating my own "mythical" trees, as the biblical "Tree of Life" and the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" fascinate me. These are such compelling symbolic entities.

Because nothing in nature is generic, I take care to paint every part of a picture with attention and respect—be it leaf, flower, tree, or rock. Even when the main focus is a human being, I don't just "fill in" a background behind the figure, but give it my full attention, to create a scene that reflects the beauty of a world I would be eager to walk into.

ROF: What about medium—you've used many. Which do you prefer, and why? Do you use computers as a tool?

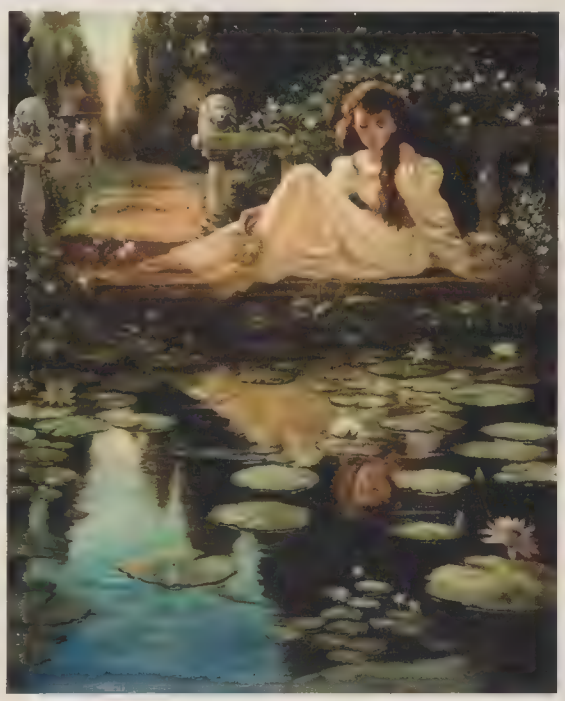
RS: I prefer oils, hands down, though I've worked in most mediums. I feel that with oils one can best convey the effect of light on a subject. For a few books I have scanned detailed drawings and adjusted them in Photoshop. I then print them out on hot press paper, seal, and paint on top in transparent layers. *Goldilocks* was done with this technique.

ROF: Which artists have inspired you?

RS: So many artists have inspired me—fine artists such as da Vinci, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Waterhouse, Magritte, the Hudson River School landscape painters, Andrew Wyeth; the illustrators Edwin Austin Abbey, Howard Pyle, N. C. Wyeth, Norman Rockwell, Arthur Rackham, Edmund Dulac, and Jessie Willcox Smith, to name a few. There are so many marvelous contemporary illustrators that inspire me as well, I cannot begin to name them all.

ROF: On your website you write about your childhood experiences playing in an abandoned amusement park. Have you ever painted any of these amazing memories, or utilized aspects of these experiences in your work?

RS: Over the years I have done a number of



The Lily Pool
oils 15 x 20"

The Ring
oils 20 x 30"

paintings based on photos I've taken there. I believe our experiences in childhood can profoundly affect us throughout our lives, for good and ill. The memory of the magic of this place has certainly had an effect on the person and artist I have become, along with my love of reading fairy tales and fantasy. While most of the buildings themselves were a bit tacky, it was really the fact that the place was overgrown and abandoned that created the magic. Perhaps I seek to create that sense of wildness and otherworldliness in my paintings even today. My favorite building was a stone cottage that I assumed was from Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, and that is the fairy tale I most want to do right now if I end up illustrating another well-known tale.

ROF: What is the appeal of fantasy art for the viewer?

RS: The whole "realm of fantasy" (good name for a magazine, that!) has a capacity to fascinate us and engage our imagination in things that are not visible to the naked eye, but for which we nonetheless feel a deep attraction and affinity. The Power of Myth is indeed alive and well, and fantasy fiction and art fill a need in us. Speaking for myself and what appeals to me personally "Fantasy art" is such a broad term covering a myriad of styles and subjects, there is always something to appeal to a given individual's interests and tastes.

ROF: How long does it take you to complete a painting?

RS: A painting can take one to six weeks, depending on complexity and size.

ROF: You'll be Artist Guest of Honor at World Fantasy Con in San Diego this year. What do you enjoy most about conventions? How did you enjoy Illuxcon?

RS: I have been attending conventions for over twenty years, mostly Boskone in Boston, and World Fantasy and Worldcon when they are on the east coast, as I live in Massachusetts. I enjoy connecting with other illustrators and seeing their paintings, meeting and listening to writers, selling some art, and connecting with fans. It is a great community. Being an artist can be pretty isolating, and it is important to stay connected and get feedback from peers. Illuxcon was terrific—I have never seen so many top fantasy illustrators in one place, many of whom I met there for the first time. I know there are many online communities, art sites, and social networks, which are useful

Knights Fighting
oils 18 x 24"

Galadriel
oils 18 x 24"

and entertaining in many ways, but I still prefer real "face time" with humans to Facebook.

ROF: In the near future you will have an exhibit at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, of work from your book *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*. What do you hope that viewers will experience from this exhibit?

RS: *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* was my first fairy tale retelling. It first came out in 1990, and I just finished painting the cover for a new edition to be released this fall by Interlink Books. The exhibition at the Rockwell Museum (dates TBA, this year or next) will include my reference photos and sketches for the book as well as all the original oil paintings on canvas, which I hope will be both interesting and enlightening to folks who think fantasy art just "comes out of your head." The book took close to two years to complete: twenty-one paintings.

ROF: Can you talk a bit about how *Papa Gatto* became an iPhone app?

RS: An illustrator friend mentioned having one of her books turned into an app for the iPhone and iPad. I wrote to the developer, PicPocket Books, to see if they might be interested in trying the same thing with some of my books. Happily, the owner was already a fan, so it worked out well. A narrator reads the stories and the child can tap on various areas of the pictures for added sounds and effects. *Papa Gatto* was my first app, followed by *The Crystal Mountain*.

We just released an app of *Cinderella* with sparkling fairy dust in many of the scenes, created by my animator/programmer daughter Morgan. (Move over, Disney!) Though the difficulty with apps is that it is close to impossible to get noticed or easily found in the abyss of book apps in iTunes unless you *are* Disney or a best-selling author/illustrator with lots of media attention. So, if you have an iPad, or a friend with one, and a little princess who loves fairy tales, please check it out my *Cinderella:* http://bit.ly/hpwxYU.

I am also working now to get all of my out-of-print fairy tales converted to ebooks for the iBookstore and the Nook, for a "traditional" picture book experience with no bells and whistles or interactivity.

ROF: What satisfies you most as an artist?

RS: I feel satisfied when someone really connects with a painting and "gets" the theme, idea, or emotion that I was trying to communicate with drawing, design, color, and the illusion of light. I am never completely satisfied with any painting, so getting feedback from others is important.

ROF: What challenges you most?

RS: Finding enough time to paint, in between doing social media, events, marketing images for licensing, etc., all of which have become a necessary part of the business these days.

ROF: Could you talk about what you're working on right now?

RS: I have been working on a manuscript and storyboards for an original fairy tale called *The Tangletree,* and I hope to finish at least one large painting for it to show at World Fantasy at the end of October. Another project is a large fairy painting with lots of hidden creatures for a puzzle company. I am also starting a series of personal paintings on the theme of fate/destiny. I am collaborating with my daughter Whitney on her second book for Random House for *Horse Diaries,* a chapter book series. Her first one, *Horse Diaries: Golden Sun,* was published this year. And I'm planning to do some etching this summer while teaching in Virginia. This year I'm taking time to do more personal

Spring
oils 30 x 32"

Above:
Fall Fairy
oils 24 x 36"

Below:
The Golden Wood
oils 16 x 32"

work, as I am turning sixty in November. As everyone knows, most artists don't do their best work until their sixties and seventies, so I have a lot to look forward to. I always post new work on Ruth Sanderson ART on Facebook, as well as on my website.

ROF: What is your website address?

RS: My website is www.ruthsanderson.com. I'd be pleased to hear from anyone who enjoyed this article. I also teach in a graduate level Certificate in Picture Book Illustration program in Virginia at Hollins University (over two summers, six-weeks each session) if anyone is interested in pursuing a career in children's book illustrating and writing.

Dragon Serenade
oils
30 x 40"

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The Myth and Magic of Narnia

by Theodora Goss

When I was a child, I searched for a way into Narnia. Didn't you?

There were no wardrobes in the modern suburbs where I grew up. But at the end of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,* after Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy have returned from Narnia, Peter asks Professor Kirk whether "there could be other worlds—all over the place, just round the corner—like that?" Professor Kirk replies, "Nothing is more probable."[1] And in *Prince Caspian,* Aslan explains that the Telmarines who conquered Narnia initially came from another world through "one of the magical places of that world, one of the chinks or chasms between that world and this. There were many chinks or chasms between worlds in old times, but they have grown rarer. This was one of the last: I do not say *the* last."[2] Can you imagine how those sentences gave me hope? There were other worlds out there: perhaps the world in which Narnia existed, perhaps others as magical. And if I could find the right chink or chasm, I could travel between the worlds, like the children in C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia.

Above: Roman Statue of Silenus

Even when I was a teenager and had stopped believing in the possibility of such thresholds, I sometimes thought, if I walk under those tree branches, the ones that look like a doorway—perhaps I'll end up in an alternate reality, one in which magic is real, in which animals talk. That is the spell Lewis cast on so many of us: he made us long for fantastical worlds. In *The Magician's Book,* Laura Miller describes her own enchantment with Narnia and the disillusionment many readers feel when they realize that the Chronicles are not simply fantasy, but filled with Christian symbolism. Miller writes, "I felt tricked, and for a long time I avoided even thinking about Narnia."[3] I did not respond in the same way. Although I realized that Lewis had incorporated religious themes into his novels, most importantly in the death and resurrection of Aslan, I regarded myself as rather clever for having discovered them. But also, for me, Lewis's Christian symbolism was not at the core of the Narnia books: it was not what made them so appealing. That appeal had to do with their fantastical quality, with the books as fairy tales.

Lewis himself was troubled by simplistic religious readings of the Chronicles. As Peter Schakel points out, "Today many readers come to the Chronicles aware that they have Christian overtones, and they are tempted to look for one-to-one parallels between characters, objects, and events in Narnia and corresponding ones in the Bible." In other words, they attempt to read the novels as allegory. "However, that is not the way Lewis wanted the Chronicles to be read." In a letter complaining about allegorical readings of his friend J. R. R. Tolkien's novels, Lewis wrote, "My view wd be that a good myth (i.e. a story out of which ever varying meanings will grow for different readers and in different ages) is a higher thing than an allegory (into which one meaning has been put). Into an allegory a man can put only what he already knows: into a myth he puts what he does not yet know and cd not come to know in any other form."[4] The Chronicles were meant to have the multivalent meanings of myth. They were meant to be fairy tales, in the way Tolkien uses that term in his essay "On Fairy-Stories": "that is, they recount events that take place in Fairy-Land, a magical mysterious realm inhabited by such creatures as fairies, dwarves, witches, giants, and dragons, a realm that creates a sense of mystery and wonder in all who come there, whether children who enter it through

Right: Roman Statue of Bacchus

1 C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 46.
2 C. S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 211.
3 Laura Miller, *The Magician's Book: A Skeptic's Adventures in Narnia* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008), 3.
4 Peter J. Schakel, *The Way into Narnia: A Reader's Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 36–7.

magic portals or readers carried there by the magic of well-crafted words."[5]

Narnia has no fairies in it, but the other creatures Schakel names are present, as well as fauns, nymphs, dryads, centaurs, marsh-wiggles, Father Christmas, and of course talking animals. Lewis's creatures originate in different mythological traditions. Tolkien, a linguistic and mythological purist, objected to such eclecticism. The two Oxford professors had met in 1926 at a faculty meeting. With a group of friends, they formed the Inklings, a literary group that included some of the most important fantasy writers and scholars of the day. After the publication of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Tolkien commented to Roger Lancelyn Green, an Inkling who had been one of Lewis's students, "I hear you've been reading Jack's children's story. It really won't do, you know!" We might have expected this response from a writer so meticulous in creating his own world that he invented entire languages for its inhabitants. As Schakel points out, "For fantasy purists like Tolkien, the eclecticism of the Narnian world is a serious hinderance. But for general readers, it is one of the primary attractions of the series. The sense of strangeness and wonder such readers experience as they read the Chronicles derives precisely from the magical reality in the world of figures they know to be only mythical in our world. And that magical effect is heightened, not diminished, by the mixing of figures from different traditions."[6]

That eclecticism was part of what drew me to the Chronicles. I was convinced that although Lewis had incorporated Christian symbolism into his novels, they were primarily about the beauty and joy of the old pagan world that every schoolchild studied at the turn of the century, simply as a side-effect of learning Greek and Latin. Lewis was a trained classicist, having won first-class honors in Greek and Latin at Oxford, and like Tolkien, he was fascinated by Norse myths, such as the death of the god Balder, whom he encountered in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "Tegnér's Drapa." The poem "awakened a deep sense of longing for something unidentifiable at the time, but associated with the North."[7] Longfellow's poem begins with the mournful lines, "I heard a voice, that cried, / 'Balder the Beautiful / Is dead, is dead!'" Balder has accidentally been killed by his brother, but according to prophesies, he will be reborn again after Ragnarök, the death of the gods and destruction of the present world. Balder is one of the dying and reviving gods of ancient myth: others include Tammuz, Osiris, and Adonis. Lewis believed that pagan myths could be read as precursors to the truth of Christianity: Jesus was also a dying and reviving god, but the myth of Jesus was, without losing its mythic quality, true. It was, not simply myth, but miracle. However, if we read the Chronicles as scholars of the fantastic, we can see that Aslan is himself a dying and reviving god. The figure most closely associated with Christian symbolism is also rich with pagan associations. Lewis himself would not have seen this as contradictory.

Here, I will focus on what fascinated me about Narnia as a child and still fascinates me as an adult: the rich, eclectic mythological background of the characters we find so engaging in the Chronicles. Most of Lewis's magical characters come from classical mythology, but Norse mythology is also represented, and there are hints here and there of eastern mythological figures of various sorts. Some of Lewis's characters appear in so many different traditions that they can't be classified in this way: Father Christmas is known the world over, and the White Stag appears in the tales of many cultures, including Celtic myth and Arthurian legend. But we can generally divide Lewis's magical characters into three categories based on the mythological traditions in which they originate: classical, northern, eastern. And of course there are the creatures Lewis simply made up, which are original to Narnia.

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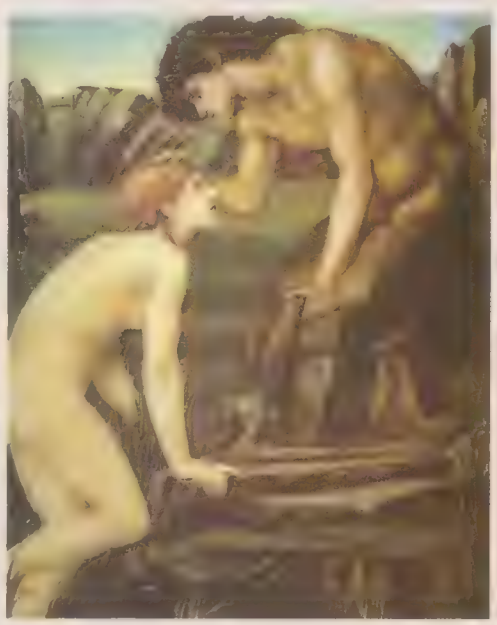
Creatures from Classical Mythology: Fauns, Dryads, and Centaurs



***Pan and Psyche* by Edward Burne Jones**

The Chronicles are filled with creatures from classical mythology; Greek and Roman myths were probably Lewis's primary mythological influence. Lewis himself said that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* began with a mental image of the faun who would become Mr. Tumnus, carrying an umbrella and packages through the snowy woods:

> He was only a little taller than Lucy herself and he carried

5 Ibid., 114.
6 Ibid., 115.
7 Ibid., 4.

> over his head an umbrella, white with snow. From the waist upward he was like a man, but his legs were shaped like a goat's (the hair on them was glossy black) and instead of feet he had goat's hooves. He also had a tail, but Lucy did not notice this at first because it was neatly caught up over the arm that held the umbrella so as to keep it from trailing in the snow. He had a red woolen muffler round his neck and his skin was rather reddish too. He had a strange, but pleasant face with a short pointed beard and curly hair, and out of the hair there stuck two horns, one on each side of his forehead.[8]

Although Mr. Tumnus is clearly a faun, half-man and half-goat, he is considerably more domestic than the wild satyrs and fauns of Greek and Roman mythology. Lewis consistently made mythological figures more child-friendly. The original satyrs, followers of the god Pan or Faunus, "were known for their orgies and lasciviousness."[9] In Greek art, they are not necessarily depicted as half-goat, although they do have animal characteristics. They may have gained their goatish appearance through their association with Pan, a god of the natural world, who was consistently depicted as half-goat. Pan was also a musical god who created the pan-pipes when a nymph he was pursuing turned into reeds. Mr. Tumnus plays a flute to lull Lucy to sleep during her first visit to Narnia, when he intends to turn her over to the White Witch.

Satyr on Ancient Greek Pottery

In the myths, satyrs and fauns were often shown pursuing nymphs, the spirits who live in trees, lakes, and streams. We meet these classical figures in Narnia as well. In *Prince Caspian*, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy return to a Narnia ruled by the Telmarines, who have denied its magic and persecuted its magical inhabitants. During their journey to assist Caspian in his battle against the Telmarines, Lucy wanders among the trees, thinking about the old magical Narnia she knew:

> A great longing for the old days when the trees could talk in Narnia came over her. She knew exactly how each of these trees would talk if only she could wake them, and what sort of human form it would put on. She looked at the silver birch: it would have a soft, showery voice and would look like a slender girl, with hair blown all about her face, and fond of dancing. She looked at the oak: he would be a wizened, but hearty old man with a frizzled beard and warts on his face and hands, and hair growing out of the warts. She looked at the beech under which she was standing. Ah—she would be the best of all. She would be a gracious goddess, smooth and stately, the lady of the woods.[10]

Narnia is awakened again when Aslan returns, reanimating the natural world. The Dryads and Hamadryads, who are the spirits of the trees, return to life, as do the Naiads, who are the spirits of the waters. Even the god of the Great River raises his head and pleads with Aslan to be released from the bridge that the Telmarines have built over him. Greek and Roman myths were filled with such nature spirits: every valley and spring seemed to have its individual deity.

In *Prince Caspian*, Lewis associates the minor deities of the Greek and Roman world with Narnia. Once they realize they are at Cair Paravel, Peter reminds the other children that when they were kings and queens in Narnia, "Pomona herself," the Roman goddess of gardens and fruit trees, put fortunate spells on the apple orchard.[11] Two other important Roman deities appear in *Prince Caspian*: Bacchus, the Roman version of Dionysus, the god of wine, and his teacher and follower Silenus, who is often depicted as an intoxicated old man riding a donkey. Bacchus is followed by his Maenads, wild girls who make Lucy and Susan nervous. As well they should, since in classical mythology the Maenads or Bacchantes are dangerous. They were known for going into drunken frenzies in which they would tear apart animals with their bare hands, eating the flesh raw. Bacchus, Silenus, and the Maenads present us with another instance where Lewis made his Narnian characters significantly less frightening and sexual than their originals.

Centaurs also fall into this category: in Greek and Roman myths, they were not always the wise teachers typified by Chiron, the centaur who was

8 *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 8.

9 J. E. Zimmerman, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 234.

10 *Prince Caspian*, 112.

11 Ibid., 18.

a tutor to Greek heroes such as Theseus, Achilles, and Jason. Chiron was a prophet who, after his death, became the constellation Sagittarius. Lewis seems to have based his Narnian centaurs on Chiron: they are great warriors as well as wise astronomers who can foretell the future, and it is considered an honor to ride upon their backs. In *The Silver Chair*, Lewis describes them as "solemn, majestic people, full of ancient wisdom which they learn from the stars," and tells us that "To ride a Centaur is, no doubt, a great honour (and except Jill and Eustace there is probably no one alive to-day who has had it)."[12] However, in classical mythology, centaurs were considered as wild and lecherous as satyrs. It is obvious from the Chronicles that Lewis loved horses. His equine characters are always noble, like the centaur Glenstorm in *Prince Caspian*, the pegasus Fledge in *The Magician's Nephew*, or the unicorn Jewel in *The Last Battle*. (Although the unicorn is not a figure from classical mythology, it was described by a number of Greek and Roman writers, such as Aristotle and Pliny.)

Fledge is one of my favorite characters in the Chronicles. Although he is initially a London cart-horse named Strawberry, in Narnia he is given wings, like Pegasus, the winged horse of Greek mythology. In *Prince Caspian*, classical figures such as fauns, dryads, and centaurs must return so that Narnia can be reborn. The land cannot live without myth. Lewis implies that if we mythologize the world, figuratively if not literally as Aslan does in the novel, it can come to life for us, as Fledge is rejuvenated in Narnia.

II
Creatures from Northern Mythology: Dwarves and Giants

Lewis's use of classical mythology is almost entirely positive in the Chronicles: we meet no bad centaurs. His use of figures from Norse mythology, such as giants and dwarves, is considerably more ambiguous.

Giants certainly occur in Greek mythology: in order to establish their rule, the Olympian gods had to defeat a race of giants, and anyone who has read the *Odyssey* is familiar with the Cyclops. However, in the Chronicles, giants have distinctly northern characteristics. They live in the north of Narnia, and they are either foolish, cruel, or both. In *The Silver Chair*, Eustace, Jill, and Puddleglum see giants throwing rocks at another rock on Ettinsmoor (a name based on the old English word "ettin" or giant), and are told it is the only game they understand. More dangerous are the intelligent giants of Harfang; the children and marsh-wiggle are almost eaten after they are directed to Harfang by the Lady of the Green Kirtle, who has trapped Prince Rilian in her underground realm. Her alliance with the giants makes sense, since she is of the lineage of the White Witch, who is descended from giants.

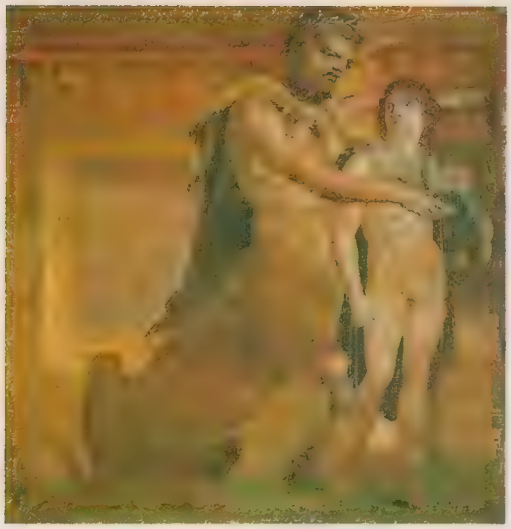
Giants in Illustration for *Das Rheingold* by Arthur Rackham

In Norse mythology, the giants predate even the gods. The first of all living beings was Ymir, the father of all giants, whose body emerged from melting primordial ice. As the ice continued to melt, it exposed a giant cow who licked the ice for its salt, exposing the first god, Buri. His son Bor married one of the giants, and their three sons, Odin, Vili, and Vi, were the first of the Norse gods. They killed Ymir, from whose body they formed the earth, turning the maggots in his body into the first dwarves. Like Narnian dwarves, Norse dwarves live underground and are superior craftsmen, making many items for the gods, including Thor's hammer and Odin's spear. The Lady of the Green Kirtle also lives under the ground, although her subjects are not dwarves but gnomes from the deeper land of Bism, where even the gems and metals are alive.

Dwarves in Illustration for *Das Rheingold* by Arthur Rackham

In Norse myths,

12 C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 207.



Chiron and Achilles on Ancient Roman Fresco

giants and dwarves can be either hostile or benevolent, which is true of Narnian giants and dwarves as well. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the giant Rumblebuffin fights on Aslan's side against the White Witch. Mr. Tumnus tells Lucy that he comes from "one of the most respected of all the giant families in Narnia."[13] In *Prince Caspian*, the wicked dwarf Nikabrik urges Caspian to summon the White Witch's help in the battle against the Telmarines. However, the dwarf Trumpkin is a loyal Narnian who refuses to join Nikabrik and even serves as regent while Caspian sails on the *Dawn Treader*. We see this ambiguity in *The Last Battle*, in which a group of dwarves turns against Prince Tirian in his last battle against the Calormenes, telling him that henceforth, "The Dwarfs are for the Dwarfs."[14]

The White Witch herself is associated with northernness. She brings endless winter to Narnia, and when Eustace first meets her, she is on a sledge driven by a dwarf and drawn by reindeer. In *The Silver Chair*, we are specifically told that she "came out of the North," and at the end of the novel she and the Lady of the Green Kirtle are described as "those Northern witches."[15] The chief of her secret police, the wolf Fenris Ulf, is named after Fenrir, the wolf who is destined to kill Odin at Ragnarök, also identified as Fenrisúlf in the myths. When she refers to the letters written on the Stone Table that allow her to take the life of any traitor, she says that message is also "written in letters deep as a spear is long on the trunk of the World Ash Tree."[16] This tree is reminiscent of Yggdrasil, the ash tree whose branches rise up to the heavens, and at whose base the Norse gods hold court.

Although Lewis loved northernness, the mythological figures he takes from Norse myth are ambiguous: they can be on Aslan's side, or on the side of the various witches of Narnia. Perhaps their moral ambiguity has to do, in part, with their appearance. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Mr. Beaver says, "there may be two views about Humans," but "there's no two views about things that look like Humans and aren't." He explains, "when you meet anything that's going to be Human and isn't yet, or used to be Human and isn't, you keep your eyes on it and feel for your hatchet." When Mrs. Beaver mentions that she's known good dwarves, Mr. Beaver replies, "precious few, and they were the ones least like men."[17] We do meet a good half-dwarf in Caspian's tutor Doctor Cornelius, but in Narnia, mythical creatures that look human, like giants and dwarves, are the most morally suspect.

III
Creatures from Eastern Mythology: Jinns and Dragons

I use the term "eastern" loosely for mythological traditions that Lewis's generation might have classified as "Oriental," meaning to the east of Europe on the map. There are not many creatures from eastern mythology in Narnia: for the most part, Lewis peoples his world with creatures from European myths. But the way he presents the country of Calormen is heavily influenced by a European view of the east, specifically the Ottoman Empire. I find Lewis's treatment of Calormen the most troubling aspect of the Chronicles. In *The Horse and His Boy*, the country comes to represent everything that is not Narnian, and "Narnia and the North!" becomes an anthem for those seeing to escape Calormen oppression. In *The Last Battle*, Narnia falls to the Calormenes, a defeat that presages the end of the world itself.

***The Water Nymph* by Herbert James Draper**

However, easternness appears even in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Mr. Beaver tells the children that the White Witch is descended from "your father Adam's first wife, her they called Lilith. And she was one of the Jinn. That's what she comes from on one side. And on the other side she comes of the

13 *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 171.
14 C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 126.
15 *The Silver Chair*, 52, 201.
16 *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 138.
17 Ibid., 77–8.

giants."[18] In Jewish mythology, Lilith was the first wife of Adam. Because of her refusal to submit to him, she was cast out of Eden and turned into a demon who seduces men and devours children. She may originally have been a Babylonian deity who was later incorporated into the Jewish tradition. In medieval iconography, Lilith was associated with the serpent that tempted Eve, and the Lady of the Green Kirtle turns into a serpent at the end of *The Silver Chair*. A serpent also appears in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* in the form of a dragon: while Eustace sleeps on a dragon's treasure, he turns into a dragon himself. Although legends of dragons are found in Europe, they are also associated with Asia. Like most figures from eastern mythological traditions in the Chronicles, Lewis's dragons are unambiguously evil.

Jinn are magical spirits from Arabian folklore. They are described in the Koran as one of the three races created by Allah (human beings, angels, and jinn), although unlike human beings, who were made from clay, jinn were made from fire. In the Koran, Satan is sometimes identified as a jinn who rebelled against Allah; both Lilith and the jinn are linked to Satan, giving the White Witch a particularly dubious lineage. The other great enemy of Aslan is the Calormene god Tash; with his vulture's head, Tash resembles the animal-headed gods of the Egyptian pantheon. In his depiction of evil in Narnia, Lewis reflected the racial and cultural prejudices of his times: evil is foreign, and specifically "Oriental." I don't think it's a coincidence that when the White Witch tempts Edmund during his first visit to Narnia, she does so with Turkish delight.

IV
Creatures of Narnia: Marsh-wiggles and Talking Animals

Some of Lewis's most enchanting Narnian creatures are not based on traditional myths but simply made up, like the marsh-wiggle Puddleglum. Lewis himself called Puddleglum and the talking mouse Reepicheep his favorite characters. Narnia's talking animals may be based in part on the characters in the stories Lewis and his brother made up as children about the imaginary world of Boxen. Lewis's animal characters included King Benjamin (a rabbit), Lord John Big (a frog), and Viscount Puddiphat (an owl). However, these characters were essentially human beings in animal form, rather than fully realized animal characters like the Beavers in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the badger Trufflehunter in *Prince Caspian*, or the owl Glimfeather in *The Silver Chair*.

We have already seen that anything resembling the human becomes morally suspect in Narnia. Although Lewis may not have done so consciously, he continually attempted to reinforce the difference between what is and is not human: only human beings, sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, are allowed to rule Narnia. This anxiety about the boundaries of the human may have been a response to Darwinian evolutionary theory, which challenged those boundaries and the Christian creation story on which they were based. When the White Witch binds and slays Aslan, among the creatures helping her are "evil dwarfs and apes,"[19] and in *The Last Battle* the talking ape Shift, who not only dresses in clothes but actually claims to be a man, brings final defeat to Narnia. However, Lewis's own creatures, the satyrs, nymphs, centaurs, dwarves, marsh-wiggles, and talking animals of Narnia, continually challenge those boundaries. In *The Silver Chair*, when Puddleglum realizes he has eaten a talking stag, he feels "as you would feel if you found you had eaten a baby,"[20] and although the first king and queen of Narnia are human beings from our world, Lewis tells us that their sons "married nymphs" and their daughters "married wood-gods and river-gods."[21] Despite Lewis's attempt to differentiate

Maenad on Ancient Greek Pottery

18 Schakel, 77.

19 Ibid., 148–9.

20 *The Silver Chair*, 112.

21 C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 184.

between what is and is not human, in Narnia the boundaries between them are not at all clear.

It is the various tensions in the Chronicles, such as between Christian symbolism and pagan myth and legend, that make them the important literary works they are. If we recognize those tensions, those of us who loved the books as children can return to them with adult appreciation as well. Miller writes of having made that journey: "When I finally came back to Narnia, I found that, for me, it had not lost its power or its beauty, at least not entirely."[22] Like Miller, I recognize Lewis's limitations and prejudices. However, the Chronicles have never lost their power for me, in part because I read them not as religious allegory but as fairy tales, which is certainly one way Lewis would have wanted them to be read.

22 Miller, 8.

Selected Literature and Art:

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The Voyage of the Dawn Treader. 1952.
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Special Feature

The City Is the Forest: a Brief History of Urban Fantasy

by Elizabeth Bear

What we today call "urban fantasy" seems at first contact to be a divided land.

This is generally acknowledged: one awkwardness of maneuvering through the modern-day SF/F bookstore is that there are at least two very distinct subgenres that may be meant by the term "urban fantasy"—and more likely three or four. To further complicate matters, most of these subgenres have more than one identifier themselves, and may be variously known as paranormal romance, contemporary fantasy, dark fantasy, or possibly half a dozen others.

As a species, we seem to have a powerful urge to classify things, and we probably don't consult the databases (or each other) often enough while we're coming up with these names. Even writers and editors of urban fantasy are unable to agree on what it is and where it comes from—which I suspect is a reflection of the chimerical nature of the beast that bears the name.

War for the Oaks, cited as inspiration by more Urban Fantasy authors than any other book in an unscientific survey.

To fully understand the nature of the confusion over exactly what urban fantasy is, where it's going, and where it comes from, it's necessary both to define our terms and to essay a brief historical survey. So, first: on to definitions.

It seems to me that there are three main streams of "urban fantasy."

The strain with the oldest claim to the name is the one critic John Clute is describing (in his *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, with John Grant, 1997) when he says: *UFs are normally texts where fantasy and the mundane world interact, intersect and interweave throughout a tale which is significantly about a* real *city.* [emphasis mine]

In other words, the city itself is a vital part of the narrative—and it must be a "real" city. Ankh-Morpork does not suffice. Nor does Lankhmar. We must be able to go to this city, walk to and fro in it, and step in the same puddles as the protagonist. This subgenre is often said to have originated with the work of John Crowley in the early 1980s, with Charles de Lint's *Moonheart* (1984) and Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks* (1987) cited as the true index fossils or type specimens, as it were, by which the taxonomy is established. It first came to my attention with Megan Lindholm's *Wizard of the Pigeons* (1985), which was then a novel of a type I had never experienced before in adult fiction—although "contemporary" settings have long been common in fantasy intended for children.

(De Lint and some others prefer the term "mythic fiction." My purpose here is not to establish a clear taxonomy of the subspecies of contemporary fantasy, but rather to trace the multiple uses of the term "urban fantasy," perhaps with an eye toward establishing a détente. It's obvious by now that no one is going to stop using it to mean three overlapping but occasionally contradictory things. The best we can manage at this point is try to get sorted what those are, and why the term is applicable in each case.)

Pamela Dean is the author of *Juniper, Gentian, and Rosemary* (1998) and *Tam Lin* (1991). Although *Tam Lin* does not take place in an urban setting, per se, it's often classed with urban fantasy novels. In part because Dean is a member of the upper Midwestern geographical cohort of fantasy writers often linked to this first branch on the urban fantasy tree, but also because *Tam Lin*—while set on a college campus—concerns itself with the incursion of the numinous into the everyday, which may be the most easily categorizable aspect of urban fantasy.

I asked her what seemed to have been the driving forces behind this "new" aesthetic of fantasy. She replied:

> I had no idea I had looked for a radically new direction for fantasy. Emma [Bull], now, quite possibly may have. I'm not even sure that I wrote any urban fantasy. I guess *Juniper, Gentian, and Rosemary* counts, but I have guiltily to confess that its influences include not just *War for the Oaks* but *That Hideous Strength* [C. S. Lewis, 1945]. And *Moonheart*. And *Swordspoint* [Ellen Kushner, 1987—also often classed as one of the inspirational works of the "fantasy of manners" subgenre]. And the Lankhmar books. Well, I'm only guilty about the Lewis. But I was very

much struck by his note at the beginning about why, intending to write about magicians and planetary angels, he had begun with "such hum-drum" matters as college politics. He says that fairy tales always do that, but we don't realize it because the hum-drum settings or beginnings of such tales are all exotic to us now. As was Braxton College to me when I read the book, but I took his meaning.

* * *

Probably the greatest unsung hero of the flowering of urban fantasy is then-Ace Books editor Terri Windling, who acquired both *Moonheart* and *War for the Oaks* and who edited the hugely influential "Bordertown" young adult series.

In an email interview, Emma Bull wrote:

> Terri entered the field when it consisted almost entirely of high fantasy of the Tolkienesque variety and sword-and-sorcery, sometimes called heroic fantasy (though that name seems misleading; heroes are stirred pretty evenly throughout literature). She was determined to expand the genre and the kinds of stories one could tell in it....
>
> She created the Bordertown setting and anthology series, and recruited writers whose sensibilities she thought would carry it forward: de Lint, Kushner, Shetterly and Bull, Midori Snyder, and many others. Bordertown was what really set the urban fantasy pot to boiling, I think; it showed writers and readers what was possible when one combined magic, folklore, and an urban culture. It illustrated what Delia Sherman once said on a panel at Fourth Street Fantasy Convention: "The city is the new forest."

When asked about the genesis of her own *War for the Oaks*, so often cited as one of the groundbreaking works of urban fantasy, Bull said:

> I remember it as coming not from the fantasy I read as much as from the city itself. Minneapolis was the first city I lived in on my own as an adult, and I found non-miraculous magic in it on an almost daily basis. Minneapolis seemed to believe in civic ritual, in neighborhoods joining to raise power, in sacred ground and holy fools and the faith that fuels impossible endeavors like garage bands, bike co-ops, folk music venues, and arts festivals...
>
> [I]nstead of the canonical single Queen of Faerie I established two queens, both haughty and blind to the needs of their subjects. The winner would be the one who could learn there was strength in humility and value in the beings she'd scorned.
>
> Which, right there, breaks from the mold of high fantasy to tell a contemporary story, a story with the values of urban life. There is no inherent power or nobility in kingship. Power is what happens when a community unites for the benefit of everyone. Nobility is the individual doing what she or he believes is right in spite of the tyranny of kings. The city is the forest, the castle, the labyrinth, the arena where the struggle plays out.

* * *

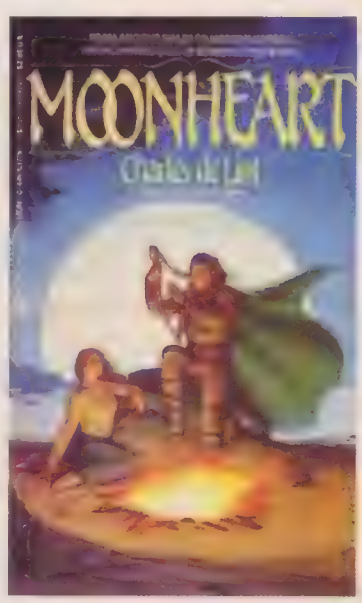
Comic books also had a heavy influence on the urban fantasy zeitgeist, from J. O'Barr's *The Crow* (beginning 1989) to Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* (also beginning 1989). But a book that seems to me highly influential—but which is almost never named when people start listing early urban fantasy titles—is Peter S. Beagle's *A Fine and Private Place* (1960). However, the term didn't exist yet when *A Fine and Private Place* was written, and wouldn't—not until over thirty years later.

"Urban fantasy" after this tradition is still quite commonly written. Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001), Tim Powers's *Earthquake Weather* (1997), even my own *Whiskey and Water* (2007). However, it is no longer the dominant mode.

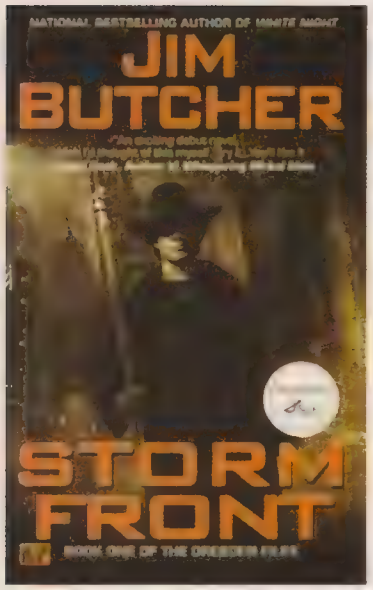
"Urban fantasy" evolved quite quickly into a second subspecies—the paranormal detective novel, which is usually found in that natural habitat of the detective novel—the series.

The most well-known modern example of this is Jim Butcher's Dresden Files (beginning in 2000 with *Storm Front*), but it traces its roots much farther back—at the very least to Mercedes Lackey's Diana Tregarde books, beginning with *Burning Water* (1989). This idea of a supernatural or spellcasting detective can be traced back in popular culture to *The Shadow*—and probably further.

Moonheart's cover makes it look like a much more traditional fantasy than it is.



Meanwhile, a similar-but-different subgenre was brewing in another part of the fantastic-fiction world—and this one was fated to *really* take off. This one traces its roots to Laurell K. Hamilton's Anita Blake series (beginning with *Guilty Pleasures* (1993)) and became firmly established as a major subgenre with the success of Kim Harrison's Rachel Morgan books, beginning with *Dead Witch Walking* (2004), and Carrie Vaughn's Kitty Norville books, beginning with *Kitty and the Midnight Hour* (2005).



Jim Butcher's noir-influenced take on Urban Fantasy

Circlet Press editor Cecilia Tan believes that the popularity and boom of this modern strand of urban fantasy is related to its cross-genre outlook. She says:

> It's a bit amazing that it took so long to get there when post-modernism had been around for a long time already by the early 1990s, and one of the tried and true pomo methods is cross-pollination, hybridization, mashing up, etc., whatever you want to call it. But there was a prevailing attitude among the corporations (not so much among the writers or readers!) that you could NOT mix chocolate and peanut butter.
>
> One of the first huge smash hits that mixed chocolate and peanut butter (and nuts and a bunch of other stuff) were the Anita Blake books. Laurell K. Hamilton mixed elements of noir/hardboiled detective, romance, horror, and mystery in a giant Dagwood Sandwich of Genre Yumminess, and what you found was romance readers, horror readers, mystery readers... ALL liked it.... The series was, I think, a sleeper hit at first, but which just kept selling and gathering steam.

These novels draw their inspiration from the same initial set of tropes—the fantastic in the modern-day world—and the earliest of Hamilton's novels are more strongly focused on supernatural investigations such as the ones Lackey's Tregarde undertakes. However, they rapidly begin pulling in tropes of the romance and horror genres that aren't as present in other books of the type.

Before we knew it, they'd speciated again.

Around this time, a tremendous influence was exerted upon the genre due to the popularity of Joss Whedon's TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), which famously recast high school through the metaphor of a literal rather than figurative Hell.

Even a modestly successful television program has many times the audience of all but the most successful books, and Buffy's fans were hungry for "more of the same, only different." Additionally, I imagine a number of writers were also Buffy fans, and inspired to write by the show's drama and combination of darkness and humor.

Suddenly, books about "kick-ass" (read: tough, funny, charismatic, take-no-prisoners) heroines were thick on the ground. Most of these books were heavily engaged with a romance with some sort of supernatural creature (most often—but not exclusively—a vampire or a werewolf) and often the heroines themselves had supernatural powers.

A term was needed for these books, and the phrase "urban fantasy" was coined.

In response to an email request, Charles de Lint commented:

> One of the most interesting differences between the old stuff and what's being published now is something I ran across in a blog (sadly, can't remember where), but it articulated something I hadn't really thought about before: the older stuff focused on creativity and the arts community (musicians, writers, painters, dancers, etc).... The current stuff is pretty much detective novels with a fantasy and/or romantic element. The latter presents a more linear, get things done view of the world...

* * *

Editor Paula Guran, who has a long history with all three of these subgenres—and romance and horror—thinks it likely that "urban fantasy" was coined a second time without reference to or knowledge of the first usage, and I concur. Unfortunately, that coinage—and the massive popularity and resulting market glut of this third strain of urban fantasy—has resulted in a good deal of confusion.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, however, was not the originator of this type of urban fantasy. The successful television series *Beauty and the Beast* (1987–1990) lacks certain aspects that have come to be commonly identified with urban fantasy in this third vein (the "kick-ass" superhuman heroine) but *Beauty and the Beast* does center on a strong female character and her romance with a moderately unhuman man. I'd not go so far as to say it was the originating seed

for the third thread of urban fantasy, but I think a strong influence is likely.

This third type of urban fantasy is the most heavily influenced by romance. As Paula Guran states in her essay in Peter S. Beagle and Joe R. Lansdale's co-edited *The Urban Fantasy Anthology* (Tachyon Publications, 2011):

> In the 1990's and first years of the twenty-first century, the term paranormal romance was often used by the media and reviewers in publications such as the *New York Times, Publishers Weekly, USA Today,* etc. to describe fantasy books like those written by Laurell K. Hamilton and Charlaine Harris as well as those by Christine Feehan, Maggie Shayne, and others. Previously, Anne Rice's work—her *Interview with the Vampire* was published in 1976—had often been referred to as paranormal romance.

Her essay goes on in depth regarding the term "paranormal romance," its evolution into "urban fantasy," and its relationship to both romance and fantasy. I recommend it to the interested reader.

This third type of urban fantasy is oft-maligned—possibly because it is so strongly associated with women's writing (although men write it too), and women's writing is still subject to critical dismissal. Its popularity may also be an influence there—a great volume of anything typically means that more of it will be of lesser quality. And—perhaps more saliently—anything that is seen to be popular, and in particular popular *with women*, will be seen as "bad."

As should be obvious by now, the boundaries between these three subsets of "urban fantasy" are extremely permeable—as is probably predictable, in a subgenre predicated so heavily on exploring the impact of faerie on the modern world. Jenna Black (author of over a dozen modern-style urban fantasy titles, beginning with *Watchers in the Night,* 2006), says:

> Emma Bull and Charles de Lint were my introduction to urban fantasy, back before the term urban fantasy was used, but I suspect there are other examples further back in time that I just can't call to mind.
>
> There are two things that drew me to urban fantasy from the beginning: the juxtaposition between the contemporary world and fantasy elements, and the strong female protagonists. The fact that most urban fantasy is set in the contemporary world makes it more easily accessible and relatable than the more traditional fantasy settings... I also love the strong, but flawed, heroines, who are more likely to rescue the hero than be rescued by him.

Best-selling author Seanan McGuire (*Rosemary and Rue*, 2009), offers an even deeper perspective:

> I believe that urban fantasy is a much older genre than most people give it credit for being, with roots in fairy tales, folk ballads, and märchen. Remember that when Little Red Riding Hood first went into that deep dark forest, people lived on the edges of woods just like it. She was living in an urban fantasy. Those stories gradually "aged out" of a setting we all knew intimately, and were replaced by ghost stories, urban legends, gothic romance, and eventually, the urban fantasy of today. Urban fantasy is very old, and it's not going anywhere.

Daniel Abraham, who writes urban fantasy as M. L. N. Hanover (*Unclean Spirits*, 2008), offers an interesting perspective on the thematic concerns of the "modern" strain of urban fantasy that is counterpoint to Emma Bull's points about urban fantasy growing out of a need to undermine the power structures of traditional or "heroic" fantasy. In an email interview, he wrote:

> Urban fantasy is, for my money, one of the genres that is most looked down upon, and because of that it has a kind of freedom that I like. I think the main conversation with UF is about women, violence, and power, but it isn't didactic. The best UF gets to be the uncomfortable fantasies and daydreams of our culture at this moment. To go back to Ms. Hamilton, guilty pleasures.

***Buffy the Vampire Slayer* teemed with sexy vampires.**

When I asked him if he thought urban fantasy was looked down upon because so much of it was by women, he responded:

> More the *about* than the *by*, I think... I see a fair number of women writing in other genres who aren't treated with open contempt the way that UF is as a

The index specimen of the third variety of Urban Fantasy.

genre, but they tend to write things that are more easily accessed by men.

UF looks like a mashup of horror and mystery, but I think its closest kin is romance (with paranormal romance being the shared territory at the border), and romance is 1) a tremendous market force, 2) geared toward women (to the degree that men adopt feminine 'nyms), and 3) treated with contempt. That looks similar enough that I think they've tapped into the same aquifer, and I think it's a place that speaks specifically to the experience of women.

Taking Abraham's, de Lint's, and Bull's arguments as a starting point, then, it seems that some common thematic threads emerge between the various subgenres or subspecies.

Urban fantasies are likely to feature characters who are not white, Protestant, and heterosexual in primary roles. They often revolve around the concerns of the dispossessed or socially marginalized—the homeless, the mentally ill, starving artists, women, single parents, working stiffs, young persons. These are not the nobles of high fantasy, but more-or-less ordinary people who are nevertheless set apart by talent or experience or simply who they happen to love.

Which leads me to the tentative conclusion that the various threads of urban fantasy are allied in more ways than not, and that a good part of their appeal may be the room they give for a variety of voices to speak up loud and clear.

The Complete Guide to Writing Paranormal Novels

Friendly. Useful. Current. Written by a collection of well-known authors for new authors, The Complete Guide to Writing Paranormal Novels: Volume 1 covers a wide range of topics necessary for building your first paranormal novel. Paranormal novels are found in all sections of the fiction bookstore. One of the most prevalent forms of fantasy masquerading as romances, mysteries, general fiction and urban fantasy, this guide has tips and topics specific to writing a variety of paranormal novels.

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Gaming Reviews

by Matt London and Matt Staggs

***Pathfinder Roleplaying Game: Ultimate Magic*, Paizo Publishing, hardcover, 256 pp., $39.99, ISBN: 978-1-6012-5299-9.**

Ultimate Magic is an accessory, a "splat book" in the parlance of the hobby game industry, but hardly the piece of player puffery that such a designation might imply. Splat books have acquired a somewhat dubious reputation in some quarters, and sometimes it's rightfully deserved. Some companies create hastily assembled materials of dubious use in questionable attempts to fleece the wallets of a sadly atrophied tabletop gaming market. Paizo is an exception: Their official rules supplements are produced on a timely but not excessive basis, and are of a consistent high quality.

Like Paizo's prior releases, the *Advanced Players Guide* and *Gamemastery Guide*, *Ultimate Magic* presents both player and gamemaster with a myriad of well-balanced options designed to build upon the existing core rules. As one might expect from its title, this book is geared toward magic-using characters, with plenty of alternative builds, new feats and spells (my favorite is one that summons a swarm of angry monkeys to attack opponents), and even an entirely new power word-based magic system. Players of Clerics, Sorcerers, Wizards, and other core classes get a lot of attention here, but so do the newer base classes, like Witches and Summoners. It's nice to see that the new guys get as much attention as the old favorites. The book introduces a new base class, as well: the Magus, a master of spell and blade. In considering this class, I was pleasantly reminded of the classic "Elf" class from the original *Dungeons & Dragons* rules. Some of the Magus archetypes are particularly intriguing, such as the Bladebound Magus, who becomes bound to a powerful sword with a black blade—a nice nod to a certain moody albino sorcerer and swordsman.

Like the rest of the *Pathfinder* line, *Ultimate Magic* is sturdily constructed, well edited, and full of high-quality illustrations. I didn't feel like any of the new material would disrupt my own ongoing Pathfinder campaign at all, and found the majority of it immediately applicable to my spellcasting players.

You don't have to buy *Ultimate Magic* to play the *Pathfinder Fantasy Roleplaying Game*, but with its preponderance of play-enhancing options, a solid core class, and tons of fun spells, why would you not? **Reviewed by Matt Staggs.**

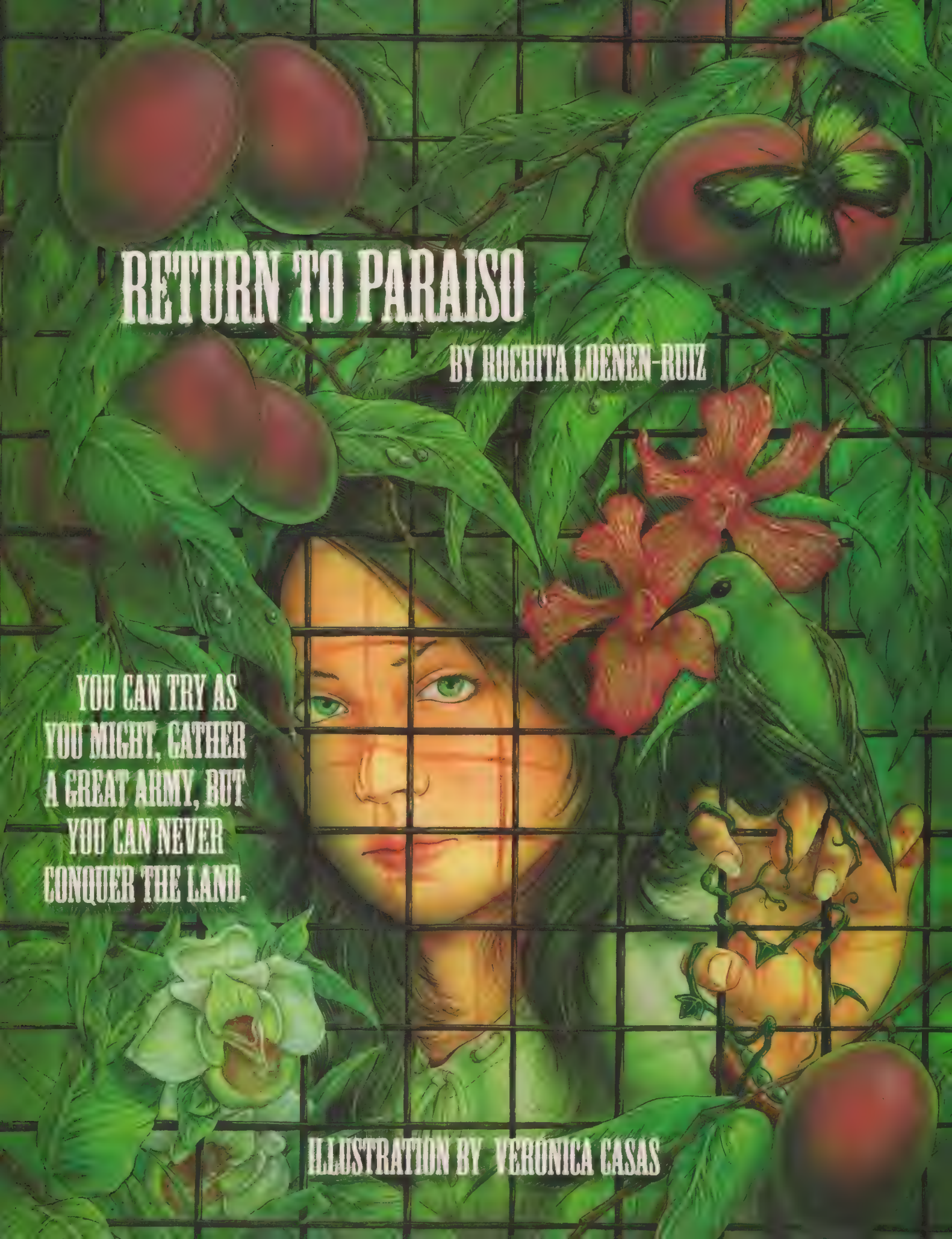
***Advanced Fighting Fantasy*, Cubicle 7 Entertainment, softcover, 200 pp., $29.99, ISBN: 978-0-8574-4067-9.**

In 1982—practically a gulf in time measured in aeons by gamer years—British game designers Steve Jackson (unrelated to the American designer of the *G.U.R.P.S.* RPG) and Ian Livingstone introduced a groundbreaking variant on the Choose Your Own Adventure novels, popular at the time, called the *Fighting Fantasy* series. Every *Fighting Fantasy* novel was a stand-alone roleplaying system, enabling the player to not only guide the story, but also create a unique character and overcome monsters and other obstacles through rolls of a six-sided die. In time, the world of the *Fighting Fantasy* books became a distinct setting all its own, with each new volume adding to its lore and history. These books were enormously popular, especially among pre-internet gamers geographically isolated from their peers.

Many young gamers cut their teeth on the *Fighting Fantasy* books, and still remember them fondly to this day. Some of them will even tell you that those books contained the workings of a good tabletop roleplaying game. And they're right.

A stand-alone *Fighting Fantasy* roleplaying game first appeared on the market in the late eighties, but with the hobby in its heyday it failed to distinguish itself from flashier, better-marketed properties like *Dungeons & Dragons*. Still, it had its devotees among gamers who enjoyed a simple but robust system geared toward "bash in the door and kill the monster" dungeon-crawling. Now, over twenty years later, writer

Gaming reviews continued on page 75


RETURN TO PARAISO
BY ROCHITA LOENEN-RUIZ
YOU CAN TRY AS YOU MIGHT, GATHER A GREAT ARMY, BUT YOU CAN NEVER CONQUER THE LAND.
ILLUSTRATION BY VERONICA CASAS

We were carting away dead trees on the day the soldiers brought Esme back to Paraiso. There were two truckloads of soldiers in camouflage, and there was our Esme sitting all alone in the back of the second van wearing a simple skirt and a plain white T-shirt. She held her head high, and didn't seem to notice that we were all standing there just staring.

I raised my hand in greeting, but Grandmother grabbed my elbow and turned me away.

"Don't," Grandmother said. "You don't want them noticing you."

I still looked, as did the other girls of our village. Bright, beautiful Esme, with her ready answers and her sharp logic. Esme, who stood up to the principal of our college demanding the return of our Social Sciences teacher. Esme, who had led us in the protests when we heard that we were being moved from our ancient fishing grounds to this patch of land high up on a man-made plateau overlooking the sea.

I looked because no matter that she'd been named as a subversive, she was still Esme who had roused us to courage and protest before the spirits of the mountain summoned her.

For a while there had been government fliers offering rewards for any news of her whereabouts. Someone must have told them about the spirits who lived in the heart of the forest, but the government never put any stock in what they called folk superstition and soon the struggle to survive made us forget that we were a village under suspicion.

Now, our Regent's troops had found her. We were happy to see her again, but we didn't understand why they'd brought her here. So we just looked and tried not to keep from letting our joy and our worry show. Even in her loose clothing, we could see that Esme was pregnant.

"Nothing to see here," the army captain cried. He ran the butt of his rifle along the side of one of the vans, and we bent our heads and went back to the work of clearing away the dead trees and foliage.

* * *

In the afternoon, a huge truck roared into our village. We watched as the men were made to help soldiers unload a cargo of long steel rods and bundles of chicken wire. They planted the steel rods into the ground, and we soon realized they were building a cage.

Through all this work, Esme remained an isolated figure in the back of the second van. Except for the man wearing the badge of a captain, none of the soldiers approached her. In fact, it seemed that everyone gave the van a wide berth.

"SHE WAS BORN WITH THE TONGUE OF ANGELS."

The soldiers must have been really eager to finish for the work they set out to do was done long before the light began to go.

The captain helped Esme descend from the truck, walked her to the cage, ushered her in, and locked the door behind her.

* * *

Esme and I had played together as children. We danced barefoot on the black sands of our seaside home, and collected a rich harvest of shells and driftwood. Even then, she was different. She ventured to the mountains, not fearing the rumors of poisonous snakes or wild swine. When it rained, she stood outside and sang at the top of her lungs in a language unfamiliar to any of us. My aunties said she had the gift of the gods.

"She was born with the tongue of angels," they said.

Much was attributed to her presence among us. The catch brought in from the sea, the safe return of our fishermen, even the way our village was spared time and again during the typhoon season.

When Esme vanished at the height of our protests, the aunties did not say a word. They simply packed up their cloths and their looms and made ready to move as the Regent had decreed.

Nothing much to see here in Paraiso. Before they mowed down the top half of this mountain to create this place for us, before they chopped down the trees and cleared out the vines, this had been a living jungle with thick vines the size of a man's wrist and trees with trunks thicker than ten women put together. It's hard to remember what it used to be. Making vegetables grow when the earth we have seems to have died is a struggle most of us have given up on.

* * *

After they moved us here, an ugly boxlike refinery was put up on the shore right below us. We could hear the sound of engines thrumming even in the middle of the night and during the day; the air was redolent with the smell of gasoline. They built fences around the refinery and posted men with guns to guard the peripheries.

We swallowed our protests, watching with bitter eyes as our brothers, our fathers, and our uncles tried to pull their fishing boats from the mountain top to the sea. It didn't take long for the journey down the mountainside to wear the boats out, and after a while, the men just gave up on the job. The scattered carcasses of boats litter the sides of the road going down. No one has fished for ages.

* * *

Before nightfall, half the convoy departed our village. Our parents tried their best to be cordial to those who remained. The soldiers had put up a small camp at the edge of the plateau, and our mothers commanded us to get indoors and stay indoors. We obeyed for we had heard of atrocities that had taken place elsewhere on this archipelago.

The question that bothered us all was this: why had they brought Esme back to our village? And what awaited us when the morning came?

We hardly slept that first night. My grandmother lay closest to the door, while my father, my mother, and my aunts formed a determined fort around me. Each one was armed with

some sharp implement. I slept fitfully, aware of the restless shifting of my mother, and the watchfulness that was all around me.

"It's not Esme's fault," my father said.

"There will be trouble," one of my aunties said. "There will be trouble, I tell you."

"Oh hush," my mother said. "We must keep alert and make plans. Whatever happens, we must save the younger ones."

Her words made me shiver. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep, but my mother's words brought me a memory of machine gun fire.

In the morning, my mother took a pair of shears and cut off my hair. She bound my chest with strips of cloth until I looked as flat as a board. Then, after examining me carefully, she made me put on an old pair of my father's trousers and a loose white shirt.

"There," she said. "That should do."

But, her precautions were unnecessary. A riot of vines and wild plants had sprung up where the soldiers had built their camp the night before. Except for the glint of sun shining off the glass face of the van's front window, there was no trace of the soldiers. In fact, the only soldier left was the captain who stood scratching his head as he stared at the riot of color where his men had been.

* * *

Captain Lagera had always been true to his duty. Always. He fulfilled everything that was asked of him, and that was how he had worked up through the ranks and earned the position of captain of his own company. But now, the company entrusted to his care was gone, and Lagera was pretty sure the girl behind bars had something to do with it all.

"What did you do with my men?" he asked.

There was no answer for a while, then the foliage moved and he saw her peering through as if she were a queen, and he, a mere supplicant. Her gaze was steady, as if she could read right through to where he was secretly ashamed that he had to do this work of arresting so-called dissidents.

"I did not do anything to your men," she answered. "Could I have done anything to convince them to desert their post?"

"They were afraid of you," Lagera replied.

"But you are not," she said. "Why don't you fear me, Captain?"

Lagera could not reply. He stared into her eyes and felt ashamed. But duty demanded that he keep a watch on her until the Regent sent marshals to fetch her or to carry out her execution.

"WHAT DID YOU DO WITH MY MEN?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wish I didn't have to do this, but I can't disobey the orders of my commandant."

"I know," she said.

And he felt as if she were absolving him of a crime.

* * *

As if Esme's presence triggered some sort of fertility gene, the mountains started to bloom in dry season. Every tree, every plant, every leaf of grass lost the dead brownness of before. Fragrant jasmine blossomed and filled the air with their perfume, and the mango trees we had given up on put out their buds.

"We'll have a good harvest soon," the village men said to one another. They wandered through the rows of mango trees, wonder in their eyes.

We dreamed of the sweet golden fruit, of harvest, and we all knew who was responsible for this miracle.

As an expression of our thanks, we wove a layette from the finest threads we could find, we cut up our best Sunday clothes to make tiny suits for her baby. We left offerings by the door of her cage: fresh vegetables, flowers from our revived gardens, sweet rambutan, and the green mangoes that are so much beloved by pregnant women.

The men of our village seemed to find new energy and they took turns trekking down to the sea to catch fresh fish for our Esme.

All the while, the captain just looked on like a man in a dream. He watched as we clasped hands with her through the bars of her cage, he did not say a word when the elder women pushed colored threads into her hands. He said nothing when she blessed our wooden looms with her touch.

* * *

All through that magical summer, we watched as the mango trees brought forth their harvest of golden fruit. We filled baskets and baskets with the sweet-smelling mangoes and brought them down to the market where we sold them for a good price.

We planted other fruit trees, and like the mango trees, these too flourished.

In the meantime, Esme's belly grew bigger.

* * *

It seemed like the season of plenty would go on forever. We walked as people in a dream, believing in the magic Esme had brought with her.

One morning, we awoke to the sound of a baby crying. We rushed out of our houses. Through the foliage, we could see Esme sitting with a bundle in her arms. Her back was to us, and something about the way she held herself with her face turned towards the bundle, made us go back into our own homes.

"We'll see the baby later," we said to one another.

"Yes, give her some privacy."

We didn't wonder at how she could give birth without a single sound.

* * *

All his years of training at Central City's Military Academy had not prepared Lagera for a life where he would be required to capture and imprison a pregnant woman.

What possible threat could a single woman offer against a Regent backed by governments from the world

beyond these shores?

Lagera tried to dismiss his thoughts. He was a servant of the Regent; he could not let this woman turn his head. If he was not careful, he would be labeled as a subversive.

He sent letters requesting a fresh detail. His commandant wrote back and said he would have to keep an eye on the woman. There was trouble elsewhere, and the commandant could not send a fresh company as of yet. As soon as this was over, someone would be sent to relieve Lagera.

"Remember," his commandant wrote. "You are the authority there. Show them who is the boss. They will see what happens to people who refuse to obey the Regent's edicts. Don't let your head be turned by superstitions and ancient beliefs. Our priority is to suppress and wipe out all insurgency."

When the child was born, Lagera sent another letter. This time, there was no answer.

"Why do I even bother?" he asked Esme.

No one in the village seemed to want to talk to him, and so he spent his days sitting beside Esme's cage simply talking. Even if she never replied, he felt comforted.

"First they tell me mountain people are subversives and should be kept under control. Then they say I should use my head because these people are ignorant savages. But I don't see any savages on this mountain. I see men and women struggling to make a life like me."

He heard her laugh, but he did not turn.

"You think it's funny," he continued. "I always dreamed of serving my country, and I don't see any honor in keeping a helpless woman in a cage."

He stood up and walked toward the locked door.

* * *

We understood that things had changed. Esme's cage was no longer locked, and while Captain Lagera still sat at the entrance, he no longer wore his military uniform.

They seldom talked with each other, or if they did, we rarely heard her speak. Most of the time, he did the talking while she worked away at a small loom or tended to her baby. The air resounded with the sound of weaving now. It was as if a fever had taken hold of all of us, for even the children had taken to weaving pieces of cloth with intricate patterns that reminded us of ancient things.

Even though her door was no longer locked, Esme did not leave her cage. Every day, she would stand at the entrance with a look on her face as if she was expecting something to happen. She simply smiled when we asked her what she was waiting for and said nothing.

"There's trouble coming," the aunties said.

"Trouble?" we asked.

The skies were such a beautiful clear blue, our trees were flourishing, our vegetable patches all yielded bountiful harvests, and our fathers were already speaking of the next fishing season.

"All this is a dream," my mother said with a sigh. "And no matter how good they are, dreams also end."

It was as if she had been given the gift of prophecy for at that moment we heard the rumble of great machines climbing up the mountain path. We stood up and ran toward the top of the rise. Two great tanks, their caterpillar treads churning up the soil, were making their way toward our village.

"They've come for her," we cried.

DON'T LET YOUR HEAD BE TURNED BY SUPERSTITIONS AND ANCIENT BELIEFS.

We ran towards where the captain was trying to pull on his officer's uniform.

"Run," we cried. "Quick, we will try to stop them."

"Take her," we pleaded with the captain. "Take her higher up into the mountains. You will be safe there."

Even as we spoke, the first of the tanks rolled onto the rise, and we knew it was too late.

* * *

The tanks came to a stop, and a large man in uniform jumped out. From the way Lagera stood to attention and saluted, we realized the man must be Lagera's commander.

The large man looked at Esme, he looked at the baby lying in its nest, and he looked at Lagera who was half-in, half-out of his captain's uniform.

"You have descended below your rank, Lagera," the man said.

Lagera stared straight ahead and did not reply.

The man made a gesture with his hand, and a soldier trotted up to him. He pointed, and the soldier quick marched to the cage. He slid past Esme who stood staring at Lagera, and grabbed the baby from its nest.

"No," Esme said.

At that, the large man smiled and turned to look at her.

"I shall spare the child if you show us where the rebels have their hiding place," he said.

She stared at him.

"There are no rebels," she said. "Only those who belong to the land."

The big man laughed.

She turned away from him and looked at Lagera.

"He can't help you now," the big man said.

"What a disappointment you are, Lagera," he continued. "Taken in by a simple village woman. What was it? Did she tell you she was married to a god?"

He laughed, and we held our breath as Esme turned to face the big man.

"He is a man," she said. "More of a man than you are."

"Oh?" the big man said. "How would you know?"

Esme lifted her chin.

"It's not the way you imagine," she said.

The big man's face flushed red.

"Very well," he said. "If you will not tell me, then this village will pay for it. I think we will start with the child."

He took the baby from the soldier, laid it on the ground and lifted his gun.

"Watch," he said to us all. "Watch and learn."

He was still speaking when Lagera lunged at him.

* * *

A tree grows where Lagera fell.

* * *

When the command came to fire, Lagera covered the baby with his own body. We watched as blood bloomed over his uniform, we watched as Esme ran to take him and the child in her arms. We watched as she turned to the commandant and his troops.

* * *

Even as Lagera fell, we could see that Esme was already changing. Before our eyes, she turned into this being made of earth and bark and solid stone.

"He who takes a life, must pay with his life," she said.

Her voice sounded as if it came from the depths of the earth.

"Fire," the commander said. His face was pale, and his voice shook as he gave the order.

The air shivered with the force of explosions, and we cowered against each other, covering our ears and shutting our eyes in fear of what would come.

When the noise and the smoke cleared, we looked up to see the being that had been Esme walking away toward the forest. There was nothing left of the commandant and his men except two large craters.

* * *

Inside Esme's cage, the foliage is rotting. We don't bother to clear it away. Soon, we will all be leaving here. We will be heading toward the mountains where Esme took her child.

"We must leave soon," Mother says. She wraps me in a blanket woven in a pattern of leaves and bark and secret shadows.

"Soon," Father says.

He looks up at the sky, and smiles.

We'll take the same road Esme took. If we walk fast, we'll reach the shelter of the woods before dawn arrives. From there, it is only a day's walk to the mountains and the forest.

"I told you there would be trouble," Auntie grumbles as she wraps a patterned shawl around her head.

"No trouble," Father says. "We'll be with friends, and Esme will be waiting for us."

It will be cold in the mountains, but not for long. Soon, the patterns on our blankets will be part of what we all are becoming.

Rochita Loenen-Ruiz is a Filipino writer who currently resides in The Netherlands. When she is not tending to her two children, she writes stories, translates, makes music, and dreams of the next trip home. She is a graduate of Clarion West, an Octavia Butler scholar, and an active volunteer of Stichting Bayanihan (a support center for Filipinas in The Netherlands). More information and links to her work can be found at: rcloenenruiz.wordpress.com.

Vampires

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Werewolves

The Man Who Made No Mistakes

by
Scott William
Carter

It's easy, if you know the future. But it can be awfully expensive, and not just in cash.

It may have been the steady drone of the rain on the church roof, or it may have been the second bourbon he'd had with dinner, but Father Holder found himself dozing in the confessional. His whole body was slumping against the heavy oak panels when the young man spoke.

"This won't be your usual confession," he said.

The voice jolted Father Holder awake—heart pounding, breath catching in his throat. For a moment, looking through the thick gray mesh, he thought he'd dreamed the voice, that it was a fabrication concocted from a stomach full of beef stroganoff—but then the young man opened his eyes and Father Holder saw the bright whites, luminescent almost, surrounding a pair of penetrating dark pupils. That's when he realized the reason he was having trouble seeing his confessor: the young man had skin nearly as black as the darkness.

"Oh my," Father Holder said with a nervous laugh. His heart was still thundering in his ears. He also had an embarrassing line of slobber on his cheek, and he wiped it away with his sleeve. "You do know how to make an entrance, son."

"Sorry," the young man said. "I didn't know you were sleeping."

He had just a tinge of a Southern accent, but of a particular variety—Cajun, maybe? It was barely there, like a radio playing faintly in another room. Whoever he was, he certainly wasn't from around here. Of course, that was true of just about everyone in Las Vegas.

"I wasn't asleep," Father Holder said, even as he blinked away the bleariness in his eyes. "Just resting my eyes a little. I was—what time is it anyway?"

"Late," the young man said. "Very late. Midnight almost."

"Ah," Father Holder sighed, and he was going to say that he should have closed the church an hour ago, but then he would have to admit he'd been nodding off. Instead he said: "Well. I do need to be getting home here soon. You didn't start by asking for my blessing, son. Did you really come to make a confession?" He felt vaguely guilty for the accusatory tone, but he knew it was because he was feeling defensive.

"Yes. Of a kind."

"Of a kind?"

"Well...I didn't ask for your blessing, Father, because I don't think I sinned. I did something awful, I guess, but I can't see how it's a sin. I don't know. Maybe you can tell me. All I know is it wasn't a mistake. I don't make mistakes."

Father Holder chuckled. The young man didn't.

"I'm sorry," Father Holder said. "I assumed you were joking."

"No. I wouldn't joke about this."

"Hmm."

"I just don't make mistakes. Even now, after everything, I can say it. But maybe a mistake and a sin aren't the same thing. I guess that's why I'm here. That, and to tell you my story—I want you to hear it."

"I know you want to talk, son, but a confessional is not intended to be a cheap replacement for a psychiatrist's couch."

Father Holder rubbed his eyes. He didn't want to deal with this foolishness right now—he wanted to be home, tucked into warm sheets, the rain lulling him back to sleep. "Son," he said, "I have to say, that's not a very Catholic idea. Scripture tell us—"

"Honestly, I'm not even Catholic."

"Ah. Well. Then I'm not sure I'm the person you—"

"I'm not saying I don't believe in God," the young man said. "I haven't until now... But lately, yeah, I've been thinking there's somebody up there. Some*thing* up there at least. My mama—mother, she certainly did. Always Jesus this, Jesus that." His Cajun accent was creeping into his voice, but it was obvious now to Father Holder that the young man had worked hard to suppress it.

"I see," Father Holder said. "Well, I know you want to talk, son, but a confessional is not intended to be a cheap replacement for a psychiatrist's couch. I could give you some phone numbers—"

"Let me ask you this, Father. Has God ever given you a sign that what you're doing is right?"

Now *that* was a question Father Holder hadn't expected the young man to ask, and there was something about the *way* it had been asked that put him on the defensive. When he'd entered seminary—what, two decades ago now—he had done so with such fervor and passion, such certainty that this was the path He had chosen for Joshua Holder. But over the years, where had that certainty gone? How many times, lately, had he prayed for some sign, however small, that He truly wanted him to stay on this path? And had he been blessed with any response? Had there been *anything* but a deepening of the silence?

"No," he said to the young man.

It surprised him. He could have said yes. It wouldn't have been a lie, at least not to the young man all those years ago who'd felt the call, the young man who'd traded in his camo and his guns and all the dreadful memories of those years in the jungle, the young man who would have insisted with conviction that he saw signs with great regularity. *That* Joshua would have been able to say yes and believe it.

But not this Joshua. He looked at those early years and saw only naiveté and foolish idealism. He looked at his dilapidated old church and his measly congregation and wondered how much longer he could even keep his doors open. If only he had a few generous donors, he might be able to do some good, build a treatment center for gambling addicts like he'd long wished, but he'd stopped hoping for that long ago. The bishop said they'd support him if he could raise the money, but he didn't see it just falling out of the sky.

And building that treatment center was the one thing that had kept him going. Without it, what kind of purpose did he have? A man without purpose was a man without hope.

"No," he said again. "No, I've never gotten a sign."

"Has that been enough?"

"Why are you asking me this? Why does it matter?"

Father Holder was embarrassed at the bitterness in his own voice. He wanted to add, *My faith was more than enough,* as a way of making things right, but he couldn't. He didn't want to say it, and he saw himself indulging in his own pity. It took the young man on the other side of the confessional a while to respond, but when he did his tone had changed. He sounded relieved.

"Well, I have," he said. "I've seen a sign what I'm doing is right. In fact, I've seen it again and again. And I want to tell you about it—if you'll listen. Will you listen to me, Father? It's important. It may be the most important story you'll ever hear."

"It may be the most important story you'll ever hear."

It was unorthodox, of course, but Father Holder didn't feel right just turning the boy out into the rain. And of course he was intrigued now. Anyone who believed he'd never made any mistakes was either a megalomaniac or delusional—and maybe both. In which case Father Holder doubted he could do much good.

But so far, he didn't detect either malady. The young man sounded reasonably sane and polite. It was a mystery, and getting to the bottom of a mystery was much more appealing than going back to a cold and empty bedroom, no matter how tired he was.

"I'll listen," he said.

"Good," the young man said. "You also have to promise me you'll never tell anyone. Not a soul. You priests have to do that, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I'm taking a chance on you, Father, so I need your promise. You have to promise that no matter what I tell you, you'll take it with you to your grave. It's very important."

Father Holder sighed. "Son, the confidentiality of all statements made in here is absolute. I have no choice in the matter."

"Oh, we always have a choice, Father. Take it from me, we always do. But I'll take that as your word." The young man shifted, his kneeling pad creaking. "I don't know how much time I have, so I'll try to make it quick. The first thing I guess I should tell you..."

* * *

...is my name. It's Michael Palmer. That's not the one my mother gave me, of course, but it's my legal name. When you're born poor and black in Baton Rouge, you don't need a name that's going to keep you there, and that's what would have happened if I would have stuck with the one Mama scrawled on my birth certificate. You ever noticed that, Father? As soon as you hear someone's name, you decide certain things about them. Certain doors open, other doors close. I wanted a name that would keep all the doors open. Once I found out what I could do, that was important.

Especially when you got skin so dark that lots of white folks instinctively reach for their wallets or purses. Even without my special talent, I probably would have changed my name. No offense to our current president, but how far a black man gets in life is directly related to how dark his skin is, not how much he jazzes up white folks with words like hope and change.

I mean, I can change things, you know? But I can only change so much. I can't change human nature.

I don't need to get into my food stamp childhood or how my only friends as a kid were the nutria in the creek near our apartment building—that just don't matter. But I do want to tell you about the day I found out what I could do. That's important, because I think it shows you where my instincts were right from the start.

It was those sweltering summer nights when the only good the whirring fans did was blow around the mosquitoes. Mama, she was real big on fans—we probably had a dozen scattered around our little rat hole. Of course, it was also all those fans that made it hard to hear the guy with the knife who'd just broken the rotting door jamb on our front door.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened had I heard him breaking in instead of what happened next. Maybe I would have tried to stop him, and he would have killed me for sure, since at seventeen I was nothing more than a broomstick. Then everything would have been different, which means me *not* hearing him was a kind of miracle too.

But I didn't hear him. The fan on the shipping crate next to my bed—a crate that served as my dresser—roared like a jet engine. I was also suffering from an excruciating migraine. I'd gotten them all the time since I was little, but they were really bad that summer. I was lying on my back on the sheetless mattress, cradling my head, trying to will away the pain—and then all of a sudden Mama screamed.

It was no ordinary scream. Mama, she didn't like spiders none, and she'd scream like she'd seen the devil himself when she saw one. This was worse. It was the bloodcurdling scream of somebody saying howdy to Mr. Death.

I was up and stumbling through the darkness, dashing to her room in nothing but my underwear. Kicked a shot glass next to the couch—it went skittering over the curling hardwood. Mama's door was open, and since she liked to sleep with a nightlight I saw the black man straddling her in the bed before I saw her. I also saw the knife in his hand, the blade already soaked in blood.

"Mama!" I screamed.

When the man turned, his eyes were so huge and white that I thought he must have been some kind of demon. No black man had eyes that big. Then I realized he wasn't black at all: he was a white man wearing a ski mask.

The man moved off my mother with the languid wariness of a leopard, not at all afraid of the beanpole teenager in the doorway. It was at that moment, when I saw Mama's blood-soaked neck, that the pounding in my head returned—much fiercer this

time, a million ice picks driving into the back of my skull.

She was still convulsing, grappling at her neck, making the worst kinds of noises. The migraine brought tears to my eyes, so she and the man weren't much more than blurry shapes, but I knew she would be dead. Dead and gone. The man took a step towards me, the knife held casually at his side.

"That'll teach the bitch not to laugh at a man's pecker," he said.

The iron grip of the migraine was tightening around my skull. He stepped up to me; I could smell the booze on his breath and the cigarettes on his leather jacket. The world was going white—he was visible only as a hulking silhouette. Then I felt the tip of his knife pressing against my crotch.

"Whadya think, kid?" he said. "Should I spill your balls on the floor?"

Mama was silent now. The only sounds were all those roaring fans. I don't know if it was Mama's silence, the prick of the knife, or the immense pressure behind my eyeballs, but my bladder let go. A flood of hot urine soaked my legs.

The man snickered. He pressed the knife just a little tighter, then pulled it back. "Scared little coon like you ain't worth the effort," he said.

He started for the door. I knew I'd dodged the bullet, but all I could think about—beyond the searing pain in my skull—was that Mama was dead. I was finally able to blink away some of the tears. It looked like Mama was floating in a pool of oil, there was so much blood.

That's when the migraine reached its crescendo. In my crazy life, I've been shot, stabbed, whipped, and tasered. I've been strangled. I've been punched in the face. I've had my ear chewed off. I've broken almost every bone in my body. I've experienced almost every kind of pain imaginable and none of it has even come close to the intensity of that migraine.

That's when the switchback happened for the first time.

Some part of me must have known what I could do, because even wrapped inside all that excruciating, mind-numbing pain, I still had room for one thought. *This hasn't really happened.* Not only did I think it, but I thought it with the kind of certainty that a person knows the color of the sky or the smell of a rose. It wasn't a wish. It was a fact, something I knew was true.

My vision swirled as if someone took a paintbrush and swirled all the shapes and colors in circles. I felt a sinking in my stomach, as if I were in a plane lifting off a runway. A violent chill swept over me, gooseflesh breaking out all over my body.

Then I was in my bed.

It was that sudden, as if I'd clicked between channels on our little black and white television. I was back on my mattress, staring up at the ceiling in the dark, the fans roaring. The migraine had disappeared. I didn't know it then but they were gone for good.

I dashed through the dark, this time sidestepping the shot glass. When I saw Mama in bed alone, not a drop of blood on her, I didn't even feel relief. I knew she'd be fine. I just didn't know how much time we had.

"Mama! Wake up!" I jerked her shoulders.

"Wasssis?" she said, her breath reeking of the cheap vodka she liked so much.

My vision swirled as if someone took a paintbrush and swirled all the shapes and colors in circles.

"A man, he be coming! We gotta hide!"

She was still pretty out of it, but I managed to grab her hand and drag her toward the bathroom. I wanted to take her to Mrs. Delawin's apartment, but I figured he was probably already coming up the stairs. The smartest thing I did was pick up the phone along the way—one of the few times we actually had one—and dial 911.

When the woman answered, I didn't even wait for her to finish before shouting that there was a bad man in the apartment and our address.

She started to fire off questions, but I left it off the hook and pushed Mama, protesting now, into the bathroom. She didn't fuss for long, because as soon as I turned the lock we heard him banging in the front door.

Mama started to scream, but I clamped my hand over her mouth. We hunkered down, putting our feet against the door and bracing ourselves against the toilet. We heard him skulking around out there for a while, but eventually the doorknob rattled. Mama couldn't contain herself and whimpered.

He started cursing something awful, throwing himself against the door. The wood splintered. It felt like we were trying to hold back an elephant. A gloved hand punched through the door and he grabbed for the handle. Mama screamed. That's when we heard the sirens. He must have heard them too because he tried to jerk his hand free.

Only it got stuck, and he thrashed about for a time before finally getting it loose. Mama and I held one another, both of us crying, listening to him running for the door.

He wasn't fast enough. By the time he made it to the hall, the police were already there.

* * *

The rain, really coming down now, crackled on the church roof like snapping bones. Any drowsiness that Father Holder had felt had long since disappeared. The young man's story was better than Sister Mary's coffee. That didn't make it true, of course. It just made him a good storyteller.

"Son," he said, "I don't mean to doubt the veracity of your tale, but are you saying—"

"I'm saying I'm a time traveler," Michael said. "Sort of, anyway. I call myself a Switchbacker. Never met another one like me, so I figure I've got naming rights."

"Are you sure it wasn't—"

"A dream? Oh no. I can see how you'd think that, and maybe if it'd only happened once I would have believed

it too, but I've since done it lots of times. Probably a million switchbacks by now. It's a pretty good name, huh? You can take it literally, because I go back and switch things around, but it's a little like a switchback on a road too—only this time it's time bending back on itself."

"Michael," Father Holder said, being careful how he proceeded, unsure of the exact nature of the young man's delusion, "I'm not sure, well, why you're telling me this. It's...interesting. It's certainly as interesting as the tales I used to read in those old pulp magazines as a kid. But beyond that..."

"Oh, I know you don't believe me, Father. That's okay. You will eventually, though. I promise."

Father Holder shifted uneasily on his padded bench. He was feeling cold. The thermostat was set to go off at eleven, but he didn't think his chill was related. There was something almost threatening in the young man's guarantee.

"I just don't know what you want from me," he said.

"I want you to listen."

"All right."

"To the rest of my story. That's all."

"Okay. I can do that." Then Father Holder had a flash of insight. Maybe this whole story was related to some complicated emotions the young man had regarding his childhood. Maybe there was some deeper issue he could tease out if he was patient. Maybe he could even bring another sheep into the flock. "Do you see your mother these days?"

"No, she died. Got AIDS."

"Oh, son, I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah. It wasn't surprising, though. My mother was what you'd call a working girl. I didn't know this until I was maybe nine or ten and I realized that she was having to pay for my food and clothing somehow—until then I just thought she had lots of guy friends. She was still very religious, though. I didn't see the irony in that until I was older. Methodist, though. Not Catholic." He chuckled.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Was this the truth or just another thread in his fantastical tale? The white eyes staring back at Father Holder through the mesh were wide and unblinking. For a moment, he wondered if there was really a young man there at all. Maybe it was just a pair of eyes floating in the darkness like fireflies.

He cleared his throat. "How about your father? Do you know—"

"Nah, let's not get into all that," Michael said. "I know what you're trying to do, and I appreciate it, but I really don't have much time." He sighed. It was not a sigh of exasperation, but one of longing. "I need to tell you about a girl. Her name's Annie. She's the reason I'm here tonight. She's the reason for everything, really. In a way, you could say Annie herself was the miracle..."

* * *

Maybe it was just a pair of eyes floating in the darkness like fireflies.

The first time I met her, she was with a group of her girlfriends at the Bellagio on one of those blistering August days hot enough to evaporate the neon in the signs. I'd been in Vegas five years—at least, five years according to my biological age. In switchbacking years, I might have already been well over a hundred. I tried to keep track, but then I got into drinking and even normal time didn't mean much anymore.

I was a miserable wretch at that point—miserable and rich. If my mother would have had any idea how much money I burned up every day, mostly on hookers and booze, she would have hopped out of her grave on one foot. It wasn't always that way. When I really got a handle on switchbacking—slowly, over a couple months after that first time—I was the happiest person alive.

I was happy because I realized real quick I never had to make another mistake. So long as I followed the rules, I could live a perfect life.

The rules, as I soon discovered, were actually fairly simple: I could switchback as many times as I wanted over the same time period, repeating the same hour over and over again if it suited me, watching *Star Wars* ten times in succession, eating an ice cream cone a dozen times in a row, but there was one big catch: I could only switchback as far back as the last switchback. So if I switchbacked five minutes, then that moment in time was as far back as I'd ever be able to go.

At first it didn't seem that big of a negative. I used my power to ace the rest of high school and get perfect SAT scores—easy as pie when you can take tests as many times as you need. I used my power to become the star running back despite being so scrawny. When you have a real life instant replay, you can dodge any lineman because you always know which way he'll lunge.

Nobody caught on. They all thought I was a late bloomer. It wasn't until my freshman year at Notre Dame, on a full ride scholarship, that I realized the limits of what I could do.

When Mama called, she was already in the hospital, and her voice was so hoarse it didn't even sound like her own. She'd gone in because of pneumonia, but blood work revealed she had AIDS. I'd pretty much turned my back on her, ashamed of that life, but as soon as she told me her condition something broke inside me. She started crying, telling me she was only calling because she wanted me to get tested too, but I was already looking up flights on the computer.

There's no need to go into great detail about the two years I spent obsessed with saving Mama's life, but the end result was always the same. I used my switchbacking to make us a ton of money in day trading, so I was able to get her all the best drugs, but the most I could do was buy her a few months. I couldn't do the one thing that would have really made a difference—switchback far enough in time to get her out of hooking or at least make sure she was always safe about it.

So when she passed a few days before my twenty-second birthday, I fell into a funk. I swore I'd never switchback again unless it was to save someone I loved, but of course there was

no one I loved. I drifted, ending up in Vegas where I started hitting the blackjack tables hard. I still wasn't switchbacking, but soon I'd burned up all my savings and like any addict surrounded by temptation, I fell into my old ways.

After five years, I was completely dead inside, a time traveling zombie—and that's when I saw Annie sitting with her friends in the Fontana bar.

At first, I don't know if it was anything more than lust. But I will say that I knew the first moment I saw her, decked out in stylish all-white denim, I thought she looked like an angel—long curly auburn hair, freckled milky skin, penetrating brown eyes. A smoky haze clouded the dimly lit room, but she might as well been glowing. I was crossing the room to get myself another Scotch, and when I saw her I stopped dead. She noticed.

That's when I knew I had a chance. I sensed the attraction.

It was the briefest of moments and then she was laughing and smiling at something one of her friends said. It may have been a flicker in time, but my whole life changed with that look.

A band was playing on stage, but I have no idea what kind of music it was—my vision had narrowed just to her, the rest of the world a gauzy blur. Her friends, all pretty white girls in chic clothing and expensive jewelry, the kind of girls any guy would have killed to bed, were nothing but shadows. The next thing I knew I was standing at her table.

"Hi there," I said, going for the suave approach.

Annie looked at me with suspicion, the gold bracelet dangling from her slender wrist as she held her wine goblet aloft. Whatever attraction I'd seen was already gone, like a desert mirage.

"Hey, you with security?" one of the other girls said. "You find my purse yet?"

Ordinarily I might have been offended by the remark—what, a nicely dressed black man in a blue blazer couldn't just be a guest—but I was focused on Annie. "I'm Michael," I said to her. "Can I buy you a drink?"

She had one of those expressive faces where even the slightest twitch of a muscle said more than words ever could. Perfect eyebrows arched ever so slightly. Pouty lips pursed. Her gaze shifted to her glass.

"Is there something wrong with the one I have?" she asked. There was the refinement of years spent in highbrow boarding schools in her voice.

"Well, no," I said, "I just thought—"

"You thought what? That I need another? So you're saying I'm a lush?"

"No, of course not." My cheeks felt warm. It'd been a while since I'd felt so flustered. "I just thought you might want company."

"Oh, so now you're insulting my friends?"

They all laughed—all of them except Annie. Her mouth didn't change at all, though her pupils narrowed as if she were a hawk soaring for prey and I was a rabbit that had strayed into her line of sight.

"I think maybe I'll go," I said. "My mission here is done. I've apparently convinced you I'm an idiot."

I was hoping my sheepish tone might win me some sympathy—get them to ask me to sit down out of pure pity. It had worked before. When I turned to go, a couple girls did say "Aww, don't go," and "No, stay," but I didn't hear anything from Annie. That's when I knew I'd blown my chance.

Of course, with me, there was always another.

This time they were laughing with me and not at me.

I closed my eyes and switchbacked to when I'd just stepped up to the table, murmuring to myself, *This didn't happen, this didn't happen,* each repetition taking me another beat back in time. There was a momentary wave of disorientation, like passing through a cloud of warm air, but I'd long since learned how to never show it on my face.

"Hi there," I said, making sure to say it to all the girls this time. "I just came off a nice run and I'm feeling flush. Can I buy you all another round of drinks? I'm pretty much a Vegas lowlife, but I'm harmless."

The other girls giggled. Annie bore into me with her eyes.

"So you're trying to get us drunk, is that it?" she said.

I looked at her as if just noticing she was there—and then held her gaze for a beat longer than necessary. "If that's what you want. I was just hoping for some good conversation."

There was more laughter. This time they were laughing *with* me and not at me. The way Annie lowered her wine glass, I could tell I'd unnerved her.

It wasn't long before I was regaling them with tales from my life as a professional poker player, and it wasn't long after that I was showing them around the Strip as their personal tour guide. Annie watched me warily, but now and then I caught another one of those smoldering glances so I knew the attraction was real. I didn't switchback, thinking I might need to rewind all the way back to the table if I blew it, and that turned out to be a wise move.

They were only there for the weekend, a rich girls' last summer hurrah before they returned to Stanford for fall term. Annie was pretty tight-lipped about herself, though she was quite free with her opinions on the fake Italian architecture and the dangers inherent in the gambling industry. Smart, tough, and beautiful, with a bit of an icy edge—I was madly in love after only a couple hours. It wasn't until she got a call on her cell phone, when we were walking under the fake sky of the Venetian, that one of her friends finally let slip who she was.

"Probably talking to Daddy," one of her friends said, when Annie was safely out of earshot, standing over by the canal. This girl, a redhead with a body to die for, was making it obvious she wanted to take me to bed. She laughed a little too hard at my jokes and found lots of excuses to touch me on the arm.

"Oh?" I said. "He keep a close tab on all his daughters?"

"He's only got one," she said. "Three sons, but she's the princess.

Anything Annie wants, she gets. And a guy like him, he can get her just about anything."

"What, he in the mafia or something?"

She laughed too hard and touched my elbow, leaning in close enough that I could smell the apricot perfume. "You're so funny, Michael. You do know who she is, right?"

"Why would I know who she is?"

"She's Annie Jackson."

"Yeah?"

"Daughter of Quincy Jackson?"

I gave her a blank look. She shook her head, bemused.

"*Senator* Quincy Jackson?"

"Oh. Well, I don't follow politics much."

"Well, me either, but I figured since he was *Nevada's* senator, the name might ring a bell."

If anything, the information didn't intimidate me. It only made me want her more.

* * *

"Hold on," Father Holder said. It was a strangely compelling fabrication, of course, but it had taken a turn he found disturbing. "You're saying that this Annie, this girl you mentioned, was the daughter of Senator Jackson?"

"That's right."

"I know her. I know the whole family. He's a good Catholic. They used to come here before they switched to the Holy Redeemer." And Father Holder thought ruefully about those generous donations that no longer graced his offering plates.

"I know," Michael said. "That's one of the reasons I came to you."

The bright eyes stared at him, unflinching. The rain went on beating its drum. Somewhere outside, a siren blared in the distance. Father Holder swallowed away the lump in his throat.

"Son, be honest with me here, did any of this really happen?"

There was a long pause before Michael spoke, and when he did, there was a new edge. "I *told* you, you'll have all the proof you need—eventually. Right now I just need you to listen."

"Son—"

"You can still do that, can't you, Father? Listen? I mean, you haven't lost your way completely, have you?"

It was as if the boy had torn through the mesh and touched Father Holder's heart with a cold finger. "What?" he said.

Michael sighed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"What did you mean?"

"I think you know what I meant."

I was grasping for something,anything, to give some meaning to my life.

"Well, well, if you think you can come into my church and insult me—"

"Save it," Michael said curtly. "You can kick me out if you want, but then you'll never hear the end of my story. And I promise you, you'll always wonder."

Father Holder simmered in silence, but he didn't say anything, and the young man started speaking again.

* * *

Eventually I managed to tease out a little of Annie's personality—how she was majoring in art history because she loved art but recognized she had no artistic ability herself, how she was a sucker for children who smiled, how the icy exterior masked a heart that was easily bruised. By the time we were having dinner at New York-New York, the grumbling of the roller coaster muted by the thick glass walls, I'd decided I was going to do everything I could to win her.

I know how it sounds. It doesn't sound rational, but then love never is. I was grasping for something, anything, to give some meaning to my life. She was a life preserver tossed to a drowning man.

Dinner was lively—after all, my wad of cash made the booze flow freely—and Annie opened up even more. She cracked jokes about all the lewd things that happened in the halls of Congress. I talked about some of the crazy stuff me and the fraternity guys did back at Notre Dame. I even told a few tall tales of the bayou I'd learned from my childhood, something I'd *never* talked about with anyone. It was during one of our laughing fits that Annie looked at me with those piercing eyes of hers.

"So, Michael," she said, "you going to be a gambler the rest of your life?"

It was as if she'd doused a fire with a bucket of cold water. The laughter turned into a smoldering silence, and everyone looked at me uneasily.

"Well, you make it sound like I'm a hooker or something," I joked, trying to revive our easy banter. A few of the girls laughed, but Annie wasn't finished.

"What I mean is, is this what you're going to do with your life?"

I took my time, sipping my beer, trying to decide the best tact to take. I wiped the froth off my lip with a napkin. "I guess I haven't thought that far ahead. Just having fun right now. Nothing wrong with that, right?"

She shrugged. "For a while."

"You know, for someone majoring in art history, you're sounding an awful lot like my high school guidance counselor."

The redhead barked obnoxiously, but she was the only one. Annie and I were back to staring at one another as if no one else was there.

"Just curious, that's all," she said. "No need to get offended."

"I'm not offended."

"I just thought, you know, with your talent for numbers, you could put it use on Wall Street or in economics."

"Ah," I said. "You mean, in more *honest* work?"

"No, that's not—"

"Something less dirty?"

"Michael, I wasn't—"

"Because coming from a girl whose daddy works in politics, that's a little hard to take."

I made sure to say it with a laugh, which got all the other girls to laugh too. It was a nervous laughter, though, the laughter of people wanting to release pent-up tension. Annie just glared. One of the girls said something

about her own father running a garbage company, and then the conversation moved to safer ground. I made sure to laugh and crack lots of jokes, but Annie said hardly a word the rest of the evening, and I thought, oh no, I've blown it. I figured I'd do another switchback after we called it a night.

When we rose from the table, I was still trying to sort out how it had gone wrong. Annie took a pen from her purse and jotted something on a napkin, which she folded in half.

"I know you'll probably hate me for doing this," she said, "but this is the phone number of Nathan Monroe, my father's chief of staff. He knows lots of people who can hook you up. Tell him Annie sent you." She held it out to me.

It wasn't the kind of end to the evening I'd been hoping for—I couldn't stop staring at her lips, wondering how it would feel to kiss them—but I took it anyway. We all made plans to meet for breakfast. Heading outside to catch a cab back to my penthouse at The Mirage, I almost threw away the napkin. If it had been given to me by anyone other than Annie, I would have. As it was, I stopped by the garbage can as I unfolded it.

It was her room number.

It's hard to describe the immense self-control it took to remain in the bar another hour and a half—an hour for her to shake off her friends and get safely in her room, and another thirty minutes so she didn't think I was *too* desperate. It turned out that was probably unnecessary, because as soon as I tapped on the door, she jerked it open, grabbed my shirt and yanked me inside.

The room was dark except for the triangle of light spilling in from the bathroom. An air conditioner moaned dully in the corner. I got only a glimpse of her wild eyes before she was kissing me—hard, desperate kisses. Her hands ripped at my clothes. We stumbled onto the big bed and it only got more wild from there.

You're a man of the cloth, Father, so I won't get into all the lurid details—but safe to say, it was the best sex of my entire life. She was a wild animal with an insatiable appetite, and it wasn't until the gray light of dawn was spilling into the room around the curtains that we finally lay exhausted in each other's arms. Her sweaty back was pressed against my chest, her hair nestled under my chin.

"Well," I said, with a sigh.

She giggled. "You're not bad yourself."

"I don't think I'm going to be able to get out of bed for a week."

"Good. Mission accomplished." Then her tone turned slightly more serious. "Don't want you to think I do that all the time. You're a special case."

"Well, thank you. I think you're special too."

She murmured in pleasure and snuggled against me. I loved the way the arch of her back fit so perfectly against my chest. I loved the smell of her hair—like lavender in spring. I could have gone on holding her that way forever, but there was something nagging me.

"Can I ask you something?" I said.

"Anything."

"What you said in the bar—about doing something with my life. Did you really mean that?"

"How so?"

"I mean, is that important to you? Do you need a guy with a respectable career?"

She took a while before answering, and when she did, there was an unmistakable shift in her tone. I couldn't say what that shift was, but I could sense something had changed. The night was gone and dawn was upon us.

I loved the way the arch of her back fit so perfectly against my chest.

"Well," she sighed, "I do want a guy who's going places."

I knew she was holding back, but I didn't want to believe it. I pressed on. "Okay. So let's say I make a life change. I've...I've been thinking about it anyway. Let's say I get into banking or real estate or something. I'm pretty sure I could be good at it." My heart was pounding, and my voice was thickening. I didn't want her to know how hard this was for me to say, but it was difficult to mask when we were lying naked in bed with each other. "So I make this change. I make this change and...and I call you up. Would you, uh, would you see me again?"

"Well, of course, Michael."

"Good," I sighed. "That's good."

"I'd always see you again. I'd see you again tomorrow."

She laughed, and I started to laugh with her, then I realized it wasn't really the answer I wanted to hear.

"Oh," I said, chuckling, trying to keep it light but still probing. "You mean, for a good lay?"

"For an *amazing* lay, actually," she replied.

"So for *that,* I don't need to change at all."

"Well, there is a certain part of you that needs to change, I guess."

She laughed again, but all the humor had drained out of me. She must have realized something was wrong because she turned and faced me, our noses inches apart. Her breath was warm on my chin, and her eyes were so wide I saw my reflection in them.

"What is it?" she said.

"Nothing."

"Oh, come on."

"I just—I didn't want to be a one night stand, that's all."

She pressed her hands against my chest. "You're not a one night stand. I *told* you, you're very special. I want to see you again."

"Okay."

"I want to see you lots of times."

"Well, that's good. That's real good."

"Michael..."

We were so close that I couldn't hide the disappointment on my face, so I climbed out of bed. The carpet felt like walking on satin. Naked, I went to the curtains and parted them, blinking at the strip in the morning light. All that had been alive at night with lurid electricity was bland and mundane in the morning, as unfulfilling as an abandoned amusement park. It was really in the daylight—when the neon could no longer hide all that gaudy architecture

and obscene extravagance—that Las Vegas was most unreal.

"Talk to me," she said.

I shrugged. "I was just, you know, hoping for more."

"I told you—"

"I heard you," I said. "I know what kind of guy I am to you."

"Michael, come back to bed. Let me *show* you what kind of guy you are to me."

I faced her. She was sitting up in bed, the sheets tangled around her legs, her breasts exposed. Even naked, she had a presence about her, something about her posture and the tilt of her chin; with the elaborate gold headboard behind her, she made me think of a queen. I felt myself responding to her, wanting her again, and I hated myself in that moment more than I ever had.

"Let me ask you something," I said. "Let's say I go back to school. Let's say I get an MBA from Harvard. Let's say I climb to the top of a Fortune 500 company. I could do it, you know. I could do anything. Let's say I'm one of the most powerful people in the world. Would I have a shot with you then?"

"Michael—"

"Annie, just answer the question."

She sighed. She pulled up the sheets over her breasts, looking down at the bed. The temperature in the room had dropped. I shivered.

"I don't know why you're making me do this," she said.

"Isn't it obvious? I really like you."

"I like you too."

"But it's not enough?"

She shrugged. "It's not about me, Michael. Not really. It's just—you know, my father. He expects me to marry a certain kind of guy."

"But I told you, I could—"

"Michael, there's nothing you can do about it."

That's when I knew exactly what she was talking about. It wasn't her words. It was the way her eyes roved my body.

"Oh," I said, a lump of lead sliding into the pit of my stomach. "Oh, I see. Yeah. I should have known. Because I'm black."

"Michael, don't say it like that."

"I'm such an idiot."

"No, you're not. You're wonderful."

"A wonderful black man."

"Michael—"

"It's okay, Annie. Really. In the old days, it was the white man who used to have a little roll in the hay with the black slave girls. Now it's the white girls who want to have a little Negro fun. I guess that's progress."

"Don't do this," she pleaded. "Really, it doesn't have to be this way."

Now it was me feeling exposed. I retrieved my pants from the floor and started slipping into them.

"No matter how much we want to, there's just some things we can't change."

"Michael," she pleaded.

My hands were shaking as I buttoned my shirt. She climbed out of bed and reached for me, but I pushed her violently back on the bed. She fell on the sheets, her breasts flopping, her legs splayed, and when she was exposed in such clinical detail I wondered how I could have ever found her attractive. She repulsed me.

"Fine," she snapped. "Fine, be that way then."

I was fully dressed, and slipping on my wingtips as I headed to the door. If she wouldn't have said anything, that probably would have been it, I never would have seen her again and I would have hunkered down in front of my big screen television and drank away my sorrows until the memory of her was just a blur. But she had to say one more thing. She had to say one more thing that cut me right to the core.

"There's just some things we can't change, Michael," she said. "No matter how much we want to, there's just some things we can't change."

That's when I decided to kill her.

* * *

The young man's last sentence hung in the air like an unsheathed blade. Father Holder cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry, son, did you say—"

"I said I decided to kill her," Michael said.

He did not say it as if it was a joke or a lark. He said it with all the conviction of a man bent on murder. The rain had finally lessened enough that Father Holder could no longer hear it tapping on the roof, and their voices sounded more hollow in the cavernous church. He was suddenly conscious of how alone he was with this young man, only a thin stretch of cloth separating them. He also remembered the sirens from earlier, and he felt a prickling on the back of his neck

"Son," he said, "have you done something? Have you... committed a terrible sin?"

"You have to understand something," Michael said. "You have to understand that switchbacking is the ultimate in wish fulfillment. It's virtual reality without the virtual. Any desire I wanted to act out in real time, I could. If I wanted to steal a child's candy bar, I could. If I wanted to rape a woman in broad daylight, I could. If I wanted to cut a man's throat for insulting me in a bar, I could. But I could also rewind time so the event only existed in my memory. Is it a sin when it only happened in my own mind? How many of us fantasize about doing terrible things?"

Father Holder's mouth had gone dry. "And did you, son? Did you do those terrible things?"

Michael sighed. "No. No, I didn't. I'd like to say it was because deep down I was a good person, but I think it was because I was still afraid of something happening. Somebody with a gun shooting me before I got a chance to switchback. Dead is still dead, I think, even for me. Of course I won't know until it happens, I guess."

"And Annie?" Father Holder said. "You're saying she was just another fantasy, then?"

"Of course," Michael said.

"So you didn't really do it?"

"Oh no, I did it. It was the one time I indulged myself."

Father Holder felt as if the confessional was sinking, dropping like an elevator. He didn't believe any of this time travel nonsense, but he was sure the young man was using it as some

sort of metaphorical defense mechanism. "But you—you did this, this switchbacking thing, right?"

"Yes."

"Oh good."

"But it's more complicated than that, Father. Let me explain..."

* * *

The key was not getting caught, of course. If I wanted to act out my fantasy, then it was imperative I not get caught. I wanted to feel what it was like killing Annie, but I had another motive—I wanted to watch Senator Jackson suffer.

Fortunately, since I'd been preserving my options, I hadn't switchbacked since I first met her. The first thing I did, after I stepped into that long, quiet hall outside her room, was roll back time to the moment when I was crossing through the Fontana bar. I didn't even look at her. I just kept walking, back into the casino. Their laughter, fading behind me, sounded like a gaggle of geese. I despised them all.

Now there was no reason for anyone to ever suspect me. Why would they? I'd never met her.

I walked home, changed into jeans, a nice, non-threatening baby blue sweater, donned a UNLV cap and some reading glasses I never wore in public. I took a black marker and gave myself a thin mustache.

After I returned to the casino, I burned up a couple of hours at the slots until finally, at nearly midnight, I saw her stagger to the elevator with her friends. After I waited twenty minutes, I moseyed my way to the stairwell. Nobody ever used the stairwell, so I was able to climb the five flights without passing a single soul.

Cracking open the door, I peered into the hall. Some old ladies were emerging from their room and I waited until they'd disappeared into the elevator. Then I walked casually to Annie's room, keeping my head slightly lowered. For the cameras.

I tapped lightly on her door.

After a moment, she answered with a slurred voice: "Whozzere?"

"Messenger service, ma'am," I said. "I have a package from Senator Jackson."

I heard a click of another door a few rooms down, panicking me, but then Annie's door was opening and I was lunging inside, my hands already around her neck. She tried to scream but I clamped down hard. The room was dark except for the little bedside lamp, set to low. She was dressed in a white terry cloth robe, and as I pushed her onto the bed it fell open, revealing her naked flesh.

She was writhing and thrashing about, clawing at my hands and then my face, but I put my full weight on her. One of her fingernails slashed my cheek like a knife, drawing blood, and this only made me squeeze tighter. She gagged and coughed, trying desperately to wiggle free, but her years as a pampered rich girl had done nothing for her physical strength. It was less than five minutes before she finally fell still.

I checked her pulse to make sure, but she was really gone.

So I cleaned myself up in the bathroom. I cracked open the door and waited until the hall was clear, then walked as casually as I could—that was the hardest part—down the stairwell and into the sweltering August night. Nobody stopped me.

I wanted to watch Senator Jackson suffer.

Now understand, I still pretty much expected to be caught. There were security cameras everywhere, of course. This was a major Las Vegas casino and there was no getting around it. I just figured I could try it a couple more times to see if I could get away with it.

But I wasn't caught.

Nobody came to my door.

Turns out all my preparations were unnecessary, because the security cameras on the seventh floor were on the fritz that night, so New York-New York couldn't even produce a grainy surveillance video. By the next morning, when the story was all over the news and I was into my second bottle of vodka, I was already having second thoughts, but I wanted to see it through. I wanted to at least see Senator Jackson squirm.

But when he finally gave a press conference, the bespectacled little turd was defiant. At five feet seven, with a rotund frame and only a few wisps of silver hair, he was hardly an imposing figure, but as he swore he'd track down his daughter's killer he was electrifying. The whole world thought so, too, because the clip of him banging on the podium was an Internet sensation.

Sitting on my leather couch in my silk robe, balancing a cold shot glass on my belly, I thought, *oh yeah, buddy, we'll see about that.* The guilt was already gnawing at me something awful, but I vowed not to switchback until he managed to catch me.

And he didn't. The bastard hired all the detectives money could buy, but nobody ever came knocking on my door. Months passed. Then a year. The guilt—it was like some flesh-eating disease. I didn't know how much longer I could endure it. I didn't know how much longer I could tell myself I wasn't a killer. I figured maybe it was time to call it a win, but then the bastard did something that really stunned me.

He threw his hat in the ring for the Presidency.

I was outraged. I thought it was a pretty callous move, capitalizing on all that publicity he got because of his daughter's death, all those humanizing interviews on CNN and *60 Minutes* that painted him this poignant, sympathetic figure. I held off switchbacking, thinking I'd at least get to see him suffer a humiliating defeat in the election.

But he didn't lose. He won in a landslide—over 400 electoral votes and sixty percent of the vote. It pissed me off to no end, but I didn't want to give in yet. I wanted to figure out another way to make him suffer.

The reverse happened. A month after he took office, peace talks between Israel and the newly nuclear-equipped Iran broke down. Everybody thought war was imminent—until

President Quincy Jackson stepped in there. He negotiated a peace settlement that had everybody talking Nobel Prize. He was a hero to the world.

That's when I threw in the towel. Shaking my fist at him giving a press conference with the leaders of Iran and Israel on either side, I said, "You win, buddy, you win."

Then I switchbacked it all away.

* * *

"Oh, that's good," Father Holder said, immensely relieved. "I'm glad you came to your senses."

For a moment, there was nothing but the stillness of the church—the creaking and cracking of the floorboards, the light wind whistling against the stained-glass windows high above them, a whisper that might have been a four-legged creature skittering through the pews. Then Michael laughed. It was not a response Father Holder expected.

"If I didn't know better, Father, I'd say you believe me."

Father Holder didn't know about that. He still thought it was a skillful fabrication, one used to mask some deeper, repressed guilt, but he didn't want to upset the young man. "I don't think you're lying," he said, and that much was true because Michael certainly seemed to believe his story.

"Ah, the qualification. Is truth in the eye of the beholder? Of course, to me, time is too."

Father Holder chose his words carefully. "I'm just...glad the story ended the way it did. It was a...terrible thing that she did, and I understand your anger. There's no happy face to put on racism of any kind. But at least you—you switchbacked away all that terrible business."

"Yes, I did," Michael said.

"Good, good. Well, I must say this has been an interesting—"

"Then I had to do it all over again."

The white eyes stared with a renewed intensity. There was no jest in the young man's words.

"I'm sorry?"

"I wish it could have ended there," Michael said. "I really do. And if it had, I never would have come in tonight. But you see, I had to kill her, Father. That was the miracle. Killing Annie Jackson."

Father Holder seriously considered bolting for the door. He was revising his earlier appraisal of the young man. Michael was obviously unhinged. "Son, perhaps we should continue this conversation after a good night's—"

Did somebody know Michael was here?

"After I switchbacked and crossed through that bar again," Michael continued, "something was nagging at me. It's a good thing, too. I wondered about that showdown between Israel and Iran. I mean, the world could end, you know? You start firing nukes and usually that's all she wrote. So I didn't switchback. I waited. I waited until the whole damn crisis happened again and another president tried to stop it. Only he couldn't. And then somebody fired one of those puppies and the world went to hell."

Ordinarily, Father Holder would have scolded him for invoking that word in his confessional, but he was too dumbfounded to speak. Michael shifted, his kneeling pad creaking.

"I did everything I could to stop it," Michael said. "I don't even know how many years I spent trying—over a hundred, maybe. I joined his campaign. I convinced him to run. And a couple times, I even managed to get him into office. But something about that tragedy with Annie tempered his judgment. Without it, he was powerless to stop the crisis. I did everything. I really did."

"Son—"

"I worked for other candidates," Michael continued, his voice quickening. "I became an expert in politics and elections. I got three different presidents elected. When that failed, I became a master mediator myself, and in a couple of my switchbacks I was even there at the table—I couldn't stop them either. I spent more years becoming a master writer and I wrote a bestseller that warned what was coming with crystal clarity, hoping if people knew the future they could prevent it themselves. That didn't work either."

"Michael, please—"

"The only thing that worked, Father, was killing Annie Jackson. So that's what I did. I went back again and killed her. And this time I let it stand."

There were more sirens in the distance, growing louder. Did somebody know Michael was here? Father Holder hoped so. He just had to keep the young man here until the police arrived.

"Michael," he said, lowering his voice, speaking gently, "if what you say is true—"

"It is, it is."

"Well, then, there's nothing I can do about the law. But if you can give yourself to Jesus—"

Michael laughed. "I knew you'd say that. You see, Father, I've been here before. You just don't remember."

"What?"

"But what I want to know is, did I sin?"

"Well, I—I don't—"

"If you believe everything I said," Michael went on, voice rising, "or if you can at least just pretend, for a moment, that everything I said will come to pass, then was it a mistake killing her? And if that was the only way to save the world, then how can it be a sin?"

The sirens were still out there, but were they getting closer? Father Holder couldn't tell. "I—I don't know," he said.

Michael let out a long sigh, bowing his head. "Well, I do," he said. "I know it wasn't a mistake. I don't make mistakes. I don't have to. But there's always the temptation, you know? That's the real problem. There's always the temptation to switchback all this away, you know? I mean, if I can't live with the guilt of being a murderer, and I undo it all, then it *would* be a mistake."

"I see," Father Holder said, edging himself a little closer to the curtain. He was going to make a run for it.

"No, you don't," Michael said. "But that's okay. The problem is, I *know* I can't live with the guilt. I did it once

and it almost destroyed me. But I can't undo it either, so I've got one choice. I'm going to book a room in a nice hotel and swallow a whole mess of painkillers. Then I'll take a nice long nap and never wake up. Since I made sure to lose a whole bunch of money at the tables today, they'll just think that was the reason."

"Son!"

"It's the only way, Father. Tomorrow morning it'll be all over the news that Annie Jackson is dead. I'm sure you were thinking those sirens were for me, but I wasn't that stupid. I was going to do this on my terms. So you'll see the news and you'll wonder about our conversation. Then you'll get something in the mail and you'll know every word I told you is true."

"What is it?"

Instead of answering, Michael rose. Father Holder was gripped with a fear that the young man was going to attack him. Michael parted the curtain, the soft yellow light outside briefly illuminating his face. He looked so young and innocent—with one exception. There was a large gash on his right cheek.

"One more thing before I go, Father," he said softly. "I'm not the only one in this confessional who's going to kill himself."

"What?"

"In all the other timelines, you hang yourself in your room."

"That's preposterous!"

"Is it? I know that you've been terribly depressed. I know that you've lost your way. Can you tell me, honestly, that you've never once thought of taking your own life? We are in confessional, now. God is listening."

Father Holder was speechless.

"I didn't come here to embarrass you," Michael said. "I came here to tell you my story because I wanted you to know it *is* possible to make a difference. Sometimes you just need someone to give you a little nudge along the way. That's all I'm doing. Giving you a nudge, because it makes me feel a little bit better about the terrible thing I had to do. Now do some good with it. And don't try to come after me. You'd never find me."

"Son—"

"One last thing. When they ask you where it came from, tell them someone left it in your offering plate. They might frown on you picking it up yourself."

"Picking up what?"

But Michael didn't answer. Father Holder listened to the footsteps retreating, the double doors swinging open, then shut. He was too stunned to do anything but sit there trembling in the darkness. There were no more sirens, but it didn't matter. He wasn't afraid because he feared the young man. He was afraid because something deep within him had been exposed, something he'd been denying even to himself.

It took him some time, but eventually he gathered himself enough to slump his way back to the rectory. He checked the news and there was nothing about Annie Jackson or her father. When he poured himself a bourbon, his hand was shaking, but by the time he'd downed his third glass, he'd convinced himself that the young man was just a remarkable storyteller. There was no proof that any of it was real.

I'm sure you were thinking those sirens were for me, but I wasn't that stupid.

Waking late the next morning, a fierce pounding behind his eyeballs made worse by the lancing sunlight, he wasn't even sure about the young man anymore. Maybe he'd dreamed him up too.

He hustled through a shave and a shower, and by the time he was climbing the steps to his office, he was even feeling strangely buoyant. Suicidal? Ridiculous. Yes, he'd suffered from a bit of the blues, but he never would have taken his own life. That was a terrible sin.

Then he thought of his treatment center and how the goal seemed hopeless. He wondered how long he'd really be able to keep the darkness at bay.

A man without purpose was a man without hope.

Walking into his cramped office, he said a somber hello to his gray-haired secretary, Wilma. She handed him the mail. He headed to his office, flipping through the envelopes, not thinking anything of it until he came to one without a return address. His name and the address of the church were typewritten. He swallowed, remembering what the young man had said, and looked at his secretary.

"Wilma," he said. "Did you, um, see the news this morning?"

"Oh yes," she said, shaking her head. "Such a terrible tragedy. She was so young. And nobody has any idea why."

Wilma may have still been talking, but Father Holder was no longer listening. He was thinking that the young man's tale had to be a delusion, a way to justify doing something terrible. Not real. Of course not real. With trembling hands, he tore open the envelope.

There was no letter, and at first he thought it was empty—until a Powerball lottery ticket slipped into his hand.

Scott William Carter's first novel, *The Last Great Getaway of the Water Balloon Boys,* was hailed by *Publishers Weekly* as a "touching and impressive debut." His short stories, originally published in dozens of popular magazines and anthologies, have been reprinted in two collections. His fantasy novel, *Wooden Bones,* chronicling the untold story of Pinocchio, will be published by Simon & Schuster in the summer of 2012. He lives in Oregon with his wife, two children, and thousands of imaginary friends. Visit him online at www.sw-carter.com.

Second Childhood

by Jerry Oltion

Illustration by Laurie Harden

Mazie was punching down the bread dough for cinnamon rolls when she realized there was someone in the kitchen with her. There shouldn't have been; Ted was at work and Gina was at school, or was supposed to be. Besides, whoever was behind her had slipped in silently, not something either Ted or Gina would do.

She didn't turn around immediately. If whoever this was didn't think she saw them, they might not do anything right away. Her heart suddenly pounding, she kneaded the dough a couple more times, then as casually as she could manage it, she opened the silverware drawer and picked up the biggest butcher knife.

Then she turned, holding the knife ready but not threatening, because it probably was Ted after all. Except it wasn't. Nor was it an axe murderer, or a rapist, but it was almost as bad. It was her mother.

That wouldn't have been a problem ten years ago, but ten years was about how long Mazie's mom had been dead. Yet here she stood, looking as real as ever. Maybe more so, since she was naked as the day she was born.

Mother and daughter looked at one another in silence for a few seconds. Mazie felt that she should avert her eyes, but she couldn't. Her mother looked perfectly natural, perfectly healthy, solid as rocks, and about thirty years old. Younger than Mazie by a considerable margin. Her hair had its color again, a deep chestnut brown, both top and bottom. Her waist curved inward, rather than outward the way it had in her later years, and her breasts—well, Mazie's had looked like that before breast-feeding Gina.

Mazie's heart, still pounding from fear, skipped a beat or two in apparent confusion, then ratcheted up another notch. She set the knife down carefully on the counter, afraid that it might slip out of her hands. Then, her voice a tiny little squeak, she said, "Mom?"

The ghost opened her mouth and Mazie cringed, afraid that the voice that came out of it would be some discordant spectral screech, but her mother just said, "Mazie," in her normal voice.

"Mom," Mazie said again. "Is that really you?"

"Apparently so," said her mother. "Although I can't imagine how it could be. I died, didn't I?"

Mazie swallowed hard, remembering the hospital bed and the wires and the monitors and the tubes. All those tubes, none of which had helped. "Yes, you did," she said.

Her mother nodded. "I remember a rushing sensation in my ears, and a bright light that slowly faded. That must have been my auditory and visual cortexes shutting down."

"No tunnel with angels waiting for you at the end?"

Her mother snorted. "Not likely for me. No devils with pitchforks, either, thank goodness. But for a second there you looked like you might be serious with that knife."

"I was afraid someone had broken into the house. Neither Ted nor Gina are due home for another hour."

"Gina?" her mother asked.

Mazie had to clutch the countertop for support. "Your granddaughter," she said. "She was born about a year after you...you died. We named her after you."

I had no idea a spirit could last that long without a body to cling to.

Her mother looked puzzled for a second, then said, "Oh, Genevieve. I get it. I never thought of myself as 'Gina' because I never used my middle name. But thank you. Do you have a picture?"

Mazie took a couple of deep breaths. "Is that why you came back? To see your granddaughter?"

Her mother shrugged. "I have no idea. To me, it feels like I just woke up after a long night's sleep. I don't remember anything between dying and now, and I don't have an agenda, other than to stick around as long as I can. I didn't really think I'd get a second chance at anything."

"Me either," Mazie said.

"Apparently it's been quite a while, if you have a child who's already in school." Her mother turned around, spotted the kitten calendar on the wall. "Holy cow, ten years! I had no idea a spirit could last that long without a body to cling to. You'll have to fill me in on the family. Did Harold remarry? Is he still kicking?"

Mazie shook her head. "No. And no. I'm sorry. He died five years after you did. Mom...are you...I mean... aren't you cold?"

Her mother smiled. "Yes, now that you mention it, I am a bit chilly. And it looks like I might actually stick around for more than a few minutes. Could I borrow a robe or something?"

"Of course." Mazie nodded her head toward the stairway that led to the bedrooms. Her mother moved aside and let her lead the way. Mazie couldn't sort out the feelings that rushed through her as she stepped past. I should hug her, she thought. But she's naked! And she's a ghost. If I touch her, she might disappear.

Upstairs, she lifted her white terry cloth bathrobe off its hook by her closet door and held it open, but her mother was looking at herself in the mirror.

"Okay, now I'm convinced," her mother said.

"Of what?"

"That I'm actually me, and not a figment of your imagination."

"Why?"

"Because this is how I always thought of myself, even after I got old. But you think of me the way I looked at the end, don't you?"

Mazie nodded. Her mother had been a wrinkled, used-up rag. Quite a lot like Ted's parents were now, tottering around in a nursing home halfway across the country.

Her mother laughed. "I don't know what's going on, but I'll definitely take it." She turned and slid her arms into the robe's sleeves, then pulled it around in front of herself and tied the sash. She looked even sexier in the robe than naked. La, la, la, Mazie thought. Don't go there. This is your mother.

And the robe hadn't fallen through her. She was real. Mazie heard a rushing sound in her ears and saw swirling

lights, and the next thing she knew she was on the bed with her mother leaning over her and pressing a cold washcloth to her forehead.

"There you go," her mother said. "Much better. I'm sorry about that. I guess it was just one shock too many."

"How can this be?" Mazie asked.

"I have no idea," her mother said. "But we might as well enjoy it as long as it lasts."

They went back downstairs and Mazie showed her some of Gina's school pictures. They finished kneading the bread dough together. Mazie watched her mother's hands sink into the dough, leaving knuckle marks just like her own. While it was rising the second time Mazie got out the camera and took pictures, using the timer so she could be in some of them, too. Her mother vamped it up, pulling open the robe to show off her cleavage, turning sideways and doing a Betty Page wink.

"Don't you dare do that in front of Ted," Mazie said, laughing.

"I wouldn't dream of it," her mother replied, cupping her hands beneath her breasts and jiggling them suggestively.

"Mom!"

Her mother laughed. "I'm young again, and I feel healthier than I ever did when I was alive. Be glad I'm not outside flagging down passing cars."

"Too much information!" Mazie said.

"Ah, I see. There really are some things the living aren't meant to know about the afterlife. Who knew?"

They had a good laugh, and Mazie led her mother back upstairs, where they tried on some of Mazie's old clothes until they found a pair of pants and a blouse and sweater that would fit. Even in those, her mother looked like a model at a fashion shoot. Mazie felt dowdy by comparison.

They talked about how to introduce her to Mazie's family. When Gina's bus pulled up to the curb, Mazie's mother went upstairs to the bedroom and waited while Mazie greeted her daughter and took her coat and hung it up and said, "We've got a visitor. It's a little hard to explain, but something wonderful has happened and your grandmother—grandma Jorgensen—has a chance to come back and say 'Hi.' Are you okay with that?"

Gina had to think about it for a few seconds. "Come back like a ghost?" she asked.

"That's right," Mazie said. "Only she doesn't look like a ghost. She's solid, and she doesn't walk through things."

"Can I take you to school for show and tell?"

"Oh," Gina said, sounding disappointed. "She's here now?"

"Right. She's upstairs waiting for me to explain it to you. Are you ready to say 'Hi' to her?"

"How does it work?" Gina asked.

"We don't know. She just appeared in the kitchen this afternoon. I was making cinnamon rolls with her recipe, so maybe I was thinking extra hard about her and she—"

"Cinnamon rolls!" Gina exclaimed. "Can I have one?"

Mazie smiled. "Yes, you can, right after you say 'Hello' to your grandmother."

A few minutes later, all three of them were eating fresh cinnamon rolls and talking and laughing as if they'd always been together. "Can I take you to school for show and tell?" Gina asked.

"I don't know," her grandmother said. "I might not last that long. And some people might be scared. We'll have to think this through carefully before we let anyone know I'm here."

Gina nodded solemnly. "Okay, I can keep a secret."

Ted wasn't so quick to accept their spectral visitor. Maybe it was jitters at the metaphysics of the situation, or maybe it was just the sudden reintroduction of a mother-in-law into his life again, but it took him quite a bit of convincing that she was actually who she said she was, and even then he didn't exactly warm to her.

"How can this be?" he kept asking. "Don't you know anything about how you got here? Anything about where you were for the last ten years?"

She shrugged and said, "I don't remember a thing. But if the historical accounts of ghosts have any basis in reality, then I probably won't last very long. I'm surprised I'm still here, actually."

"Did you leave anything unfinished?" Ted asked.

"Thousands of things," Mazie's mother said, laughing. "I really didn't expect to get cancer at sixty-three. But if it's been ten years and Harold's already gone, then I don't think any of that's important anymore."

They had dinner, then settled into the living room to talk. At times it seemed almost normal, as if Mazie's mother had just flown in from Michigan to visit for a few days; then the surreality of it would hit one or another of them and they would zone out for a few minutes until they got over it. Even Gina seemed weirded out at times, and Mazie wondered how she would sleep that night.

She did fine, though, better than Ted or Mazie, or even Mazie's mother, who stayed on the fold-out couch but confessed in the morning that she had been afraid to close her eyes for fear she would never wake up again.

But she was still there in the morning, hungry and healthy and ready to take on the world. She helped cook breakfast, and while they were eating it Mazie said, "We should do something special today. Go have a family picnic in the woods or something."

"You mean I don't have to go to school today?" Gina asked excitedly.

"Of course you do," Ted said, just as Mazie said, "Of course not."

Mazie looked at Ted. "How often does her grandmother come back from the dead? Let's make the most of it while we can."

"All right," he said. "I guess she can stay home, but I've got a conference call at ten."

"Call in sick," Mazie said.

"I'll still have to take the call. And I can't do that in the woods."

"Sure you can. There's a cell tower on Willamette Pass. We can go to Gold Lake and you'll have plenty of

reception."

"And if I need to look something up on my computer?"

"Bring the computer! Come on, Ted, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Better than once in a lifetime, and you want to trade it for a conference call?"

He didn't answer. Mazie knew what that meant. It meant she had won the argument, but would regret it all day.

"You know, on second thought, why don't you go to work," she said.

"Huh?"

"We'll just make it a girls' day out."

His expression was so comical that Mazie had to laugh. He obviously didn't know if he'd been given something or had had something taken away.

Mazie's mom gave him a big hug when he left for work. As they watched his car roll down the street, she turned to Mazie and said, "This is going to become kind of awkward if I stick around, isn't it?"

"No!" Mazie said, and she hugged her mother fiercely. "I want you to stay as long as you can."

"I doubt if I have much say in the matter," her mother said, but she persisted throughout that whole day. She and Mazie and Gina had a wonderful day in the mountains, walking along the lakeshore and listening to the birds and squirrels calling from the trees. "Whatever happens," Mazie's mother said, "I'll forever be grateful for the chance to do this again."

Dinner that night was a bit strained. Ted barely spoke, and as soon as he finished eating he got up and went into his den. Mazie visited with her mother, doing the dishes together and cleaning up the kitchen and then settling into the living room with a bottle of wine. Her mom started recalling stories from her early days with Harold, telling Mazie about the time her father had swamped their canoe on their first date, and how the two of them had made a batch of dandelion wine strong enough to clean floors with, and so on, story after story. Some of them Mazie remembered and some she didn't, but they all brought back memories and stories of her own.

She was amazed at how sensual her mother's memories were. The canoe story ended with her standing on the bank, drenched, her clothing sticking to every curve of her body while Harold tried not to look while at the same time unable not to. The wine story ended up with the two of them drunk as lords and chasing each other around the house. Mazie felt herself blushing and wondering if she should send Gina to bed, but she couldn't tell her mother to tone it down. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she realized that her mother's attitude was the more healthy and honest one. People were sensual beings, yet society—at least American society—suppressed it and made the subject taboo even between a mother and daughter.

Maybe it took dying and getting a second chance to shake a person out of that paradigm. Maybe that was what her mother had come back to do: make Mazie understand that she didn't have to be so hung up about things.

"You conjured her up; you figure out how to get rid of her."

She let Gina stay up with her grandmother until nearly midnight, but eventually everyone was yawning, so she shooed Gina off to bed and did the same herself.

Ted was already in bed. She slid in beside him, a little aroused by her mother's stories, and snuggled in close, running her hands over his chest and kissing him on the neck.

"You've got to be kidding," he muttered.

She froze. "What?"

Softly, in the voice he used when he didn't want Gina to hear them arguing, he said, "You can't seriously be thinking about sex while your mother's ghost is sleeping on our couch."

All her ardor vanished in an instant. "Well, I'm sure not now." She rolled away.

"We can't go on like this," he said.

"She's been here one day," Mazie said. "What do you want me to do, kick her out?"

"I want you to send her back to wherever she came from."

"How?"

"I don't know. You conjured her up; you figure out how to get rid of her."

"Why?"

"Because she's unnatural."

"She's my mother. She's real, Ted. She breathes and eats and thinks and talks and she's bringing back memories I'd forgotten for thirty years."

"And she's creeping me out."

"Jesus Christ, I've got my mother back and you're complaining about it!" She didn't realize how loudly she'd said that until he shushed her.

"Tell the whole world, why don't you. Look, I'm just saying I don't think this is right. A kid shouldn't have to deal with a ghost in the house. *I* shouldn't have to deal with a ghost in the house."

"So I should send my mother away because she makes you uncomfortable?"

He didn't reply immediately. Maybe he couldn't find the right way to phrase it so he didn't sound like a dick. Mazie didn't cut him any slack, waiting in silence for him to either figure it out or not. At last he said, "I don't think one guy in ten likes his mother-in-law. I didn't like yours when she was alive, and I don't like her now. And surprise, surprise, I apparently don't like ghosts, either. My hackles go up whenever I'm near her, and I can't control it. It's like agoraphobia or claustrophobia or something. I've tried to suppress it, but—"

"Bullshit."

"Huh?"

"You haven't tried at all. You went to work rather than spend time with her. You've avoided her as much as possible when you're home. That's not trying; that's hiding."

He lay there in bed, his heavy breaths saying more than words could. At last he asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"Accept her," she said. "Get to know her. Bury the hatchet after all this time. Maybe her unfinished

business is *you*."

"She showed up in the kitchen, not in the den," Ted said.

"Okay, you've got a point there. So if there's anything significant about that, then it's me she's here for, not you."

"Or the kitchen. We've got a lot of her pots and pans."

Mazie snorted. "Yeah, right. She came back to spend one more day cooking."

Ted laughed softly. "Not your mother."

He could have meant that so many ways. If she hadn't spent fifteen years married to him she might have hit him, or packed her suitcase and left him, but she knew that laugh and it narrowed down the possibilities to three or four, all of which were in fact funny. Mazie's mom was a terrible cook.

So she punched Ted in the side, but playfully. "You're awful."

"So was her pot roast."

"Maybe that's her unfinished business: to cook the perfect pot roast."

"Then let's get her one tomorrow. And you help cook it."

"You really want her gone, don't you?"

He took a deep breath. "I apologize from the bottom of my heart, but I really do."

"In the meantime, can you at least be civil to her?"

"I can," he said. "As long as she understands that ghosts give me the willies. I'm not making that up. It's real. And I apologize for turning you down tonight, but a ghost of your mother gives my willie the willies."

Now it was Mazie's turn to weigh her words carefully. Finally she said, "That's a pretty strange reaction, considering she's hotter looking than I am."

He shook his head, a shadow in the near darkness. "That's neither true nor the problem. It's the supernatural aspect of it all that's the problem."

"So I don't have to worry about you getting it on with a succubus, then?"

"Probably not."

"Well, that's a relief."

They lay side-by-side in silence for a while, the conversation not over but not advancing, either. Then, just as Mazie was about to fall asleep, Ted said, "There's one more thing."

"What."

"I envy you."

"Envy? But—"

He sat up. "My parents are a couple of old wrecks who can't even remember their own names half the time. We go see them twice a year because we have to, not because either of us wants to. Yet here's your mother, young and vibrant and healthy again. You've got your childhood mom back. I want *my* mother back. And my father, too."

"Oh." Mazie leaned into him, put her arm around him. "Okay, I see that."

He rested his head on hers. "I just figured it out myself."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be. Enjoy it while you've got it."

"You mean that?"

"Yes. At least I think I do."

"Okay. That's as much as I can ask for. Thank you."

They lay back and snuggled together, and eventually Mazie realized that sunlight was peeking in the window and somebody was banging pots around in the kitchen. The aroma of something on fire wafted in from the hallway.

"You're awful."

"So was her pot roast."

"Oh, dear God," she whispered. "She's making pancakes." She slipped out of bed, put on her robe, and went to look. The kitchen was a disaster area and both Gina and Mazie's mother were in the middle of it, as happy as puppies in a park. A thick stack of half-burnt pancakes teetered on a plate beside the griddle, which smoked over two burners, both on high.

"Thought the smell would get you up," Mazie's mother said brightly. "It always did."

"Because I kept thinking I should save the valuables," Mazie said, forcing a smile. She turned down the burners and divided the stack of pancakes in two.

"We tried waffles, but they stuck," said Gina, pointing to the waffle iron, encrusted with the shredded remains of their attempt.

With the efficiency of an emergency room nurse, which she might have been if she hadn't elected to stay home and take care of her daughter, Mazie decided what could wait until later and what needed her attention now. She handed her mother a set of placemats and Gina a fistful of silverware, taking the pitcher of batter and the spatula from their hands and finishing up the cooking herself.

Ted showed up a few minutes later and stoically dug into the pile of burned pancakes, leaving the good ones for Gina and Mazie and her mother. "So what's the plan for today?" he said.

"Let's go on another hike!" Gina shouted.

This time it was Mazie's turn to say, "Not today, hon. You can't skip two days of school in a row."

"Aw, Mom!"

"No arguments. Your grandmother doesn't seem to be going anywhere soon, so you'll see her again when you get home. And today's Friday, so you'll have the whole weekend with her." She turned to Ted. "What about you?"

He looked up, a black wedge of pancake halfway to his mouth. "I'm going to work, but I'll see if I can arrange to take next week off."

"All week?" she asked. "That's... you won't have enough vacation time left to go see your own parents."

He shrugged. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Right now I think this is more important."

Mazie's mom frowned. "Your parents must be in their seventies now. How are they?"

"Not good," he said.

"Then you should save your vacation time to go see them."

He set his fork down, still bearing its load of burnt pancake. "It doesn't matter. They don't know I'm there half the time, and even when they know it's me, they forget I was there the moment I leave."

"They've both turned senile?"

"It's called Alzheimer's now. But yeah, they've both got it. I don't know if that's a blessing or a curse, that they're both dealing with it together."

Gina said, "Gramma says it's fun to meet so many friendly people, over and over again."

Mazie's mom smiled. "She would say something like that. Irene was one of the most positive people I knew."

"Lot of good it did her, eh?" said Ted.

"I bet it's doing her a world of good right now." Mazie's mom leaned back in her chair, tilting it back until it balanced on its hind legs. "Old people don't think of themselves as old, you know. They remember themselves as young and healthy, and they're puzzled as hell—excuse me, dear," she said to Gina "—puzzled as heck about how they got into those wrinkly old bodies. It takes a positive attitude to face yourself in the mirror every morning."

"Maybe if people knew they could come back the way you have, it wouldn't be so hard to take," Mazie said.

"You know what's hard to take," Mazie's mother said. "It's being *treated* like you're old."

Ted looked at her, then looked down at his fork full of burned pancake. He set it down, then reached for an unburned one. "No offense," he said, "but Harold clearly married you for your body, not your cooking."

Mazie gasped, but her mother laughed, great peals of laughter that eventually drew Gina, then Mazie, then Ted into its sway. They laughed until they began to hiccup, the tension draining out of them with their tears. When she could catch her breath, Mazie's mother said, "I've been waiting half my life for someone other than Harold to have the courage and the honesty to say that to me."

And a moment later her clothing fell to her chair, empty, and her chair clunked forward to land on all four legs.

Gina burst into genuine tears, and Mazie picked her up and held her while she cried.

"That was it?" Ted said, stunned. "She needed to be told her cooking sucked?"

Mazie couldn't believe it herself, yet the evidence seemed irrefutable. It wasn't until two months later, when she and Ted and Gina made their semi-annual trip to see his parents in the nursing home, and Ted spent the entire time swapping stories with them about their childhoods, that she suspected there might have been more to it than that.

Jerry Oltion's "Tools of the Devil" appeared in the December 2010 issue of *Realms of Fantasy*. Since 1982 Jerry has published nearly 150 stories and fifteen novels, and is now tied with Christopher Anvil for the title of most prolific fiction contributor in the history of *Analog/Astounding* magazine. His novella, "Abandon in Place," won the Nebula Award in 1998. Jerry is also an amateur astronomer and telescope maker. His latest project is a seriously cool scaled-up replica of a child's telescope called the Edmund Scientific Astroscan. He lives in Oregon with his wife, Kathy, and the obligatory writer's cat, Stormy. His website: www.sff.net/people/j.oltion.

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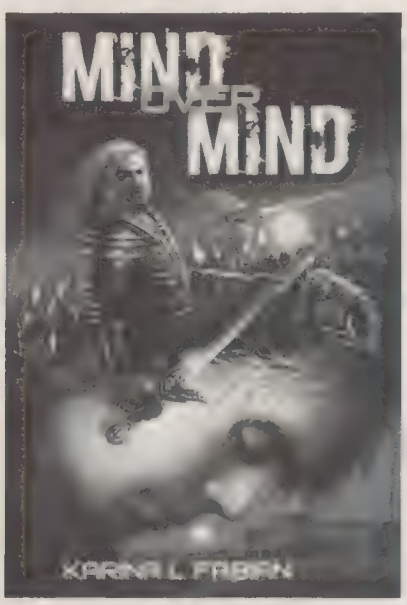

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Sweeping the Hearthstone

My real mam got me when she shouldn't have.

I never knew her; she was young, they said, and of cruel family, with nobody to back her up and make the lad stand and be daddy. She put me in a basket and left me by the highway for the Roadsouls, when they passed in their painted caravans. The Roadsouls took me up, and I traveled with them till the spring I turned sixteen. Then Neely Sheeker, who runs a roadhouse near Carmony, needed a girl and hired me off the Souls.

I was happy to go. I'd come to womanhood late, and was beginning to quarrel with those who raised me. I'm a homebody; I was sick of traveling about, and I had my cat, Suli. Traveling's hard on a cat. I was ready to dig in a garden and see the same thing out a window twice, and find out what it's like to live in a house built on the ground.

And Neely's roadhouse was. It was old as mountains, and the bit that was to be mine was in the oldest part. I followed her there, carrying Suli and my little bundle. We went in through the big front doors, past the barroom to a low-beamed stone hall that maybe had been the public room a couple hundred years ago, and old even then. It was a storeroom now, piled with sacks of flour, broken chairs, empty barrels, handle-less pint mugs. I was to have a tiny room just off it, near the hearth. The wide old fireplace had been bricked up to take an iron stove with a brisk little fire in it. But right away I loved the hearthstone.

It was huge. Maybe eight feet long and four wide. I didn't see how men could have shifted it. Clearly it had been there first, and the house built around it: the low hall, and then, little by little over centuries, the roadhouse as it now stood, with its big public room and kitchen, and an apartment above where Neely lived with her farrier husband.

"Corrie, here's your room," said Neely, drawing me past the hearth to my cubby. She was tall as a teamster, with a stern voice. I knew the three girls before me had quit—just quit, for no reason. It had me worried. "There's no fireplace anymore," she said, "but light the stove whenever you wish."

"Thank you, Ma'am. It's lovely."

My room had a barred window and a narrow bed and tulips in a vase on the washstand. It was more than I'd had in my life, yet when Neely had left me I put my bundle on the bed and went straight back out to the old hearth.

I set Suli down on it. She'd been hired same as me, though her task was the storeroom mice.

She sat. Her purr was thunder.

Until that hour I had never lived anywhere but in a Roadsoul cart. I stepped out of my clogs and stood on that stone in my stockings. It was warm, worn smooth by a thousand years of feet. I sat down cross-legged.

> "You could wake a dead man."

"Here I am," I said.

Then I scrambled up, for there was Neely with a towel for me. She handed it over and said, "What's that cat staring at?"

"Nothing, Ma'am. She just does that."

"Gives me the creeps. And don't call me 'Ma'am.' I'm Neely."

"Yes, Ma'am. Neely." I wriggled my toes. "Please—the stone?"

She scowled. "What about it?"

"However was it brought here?"

"Those who could answer that have been dead a thousand years," she said, turning away. "Or two thousand. Your task is to sweep it." She nodded at a corner stacked with mops and a brand new broom. "When you've put away your things, bring that broom to the public room."

She left.

I swept the hearthstone. I knelt and patted it. Then I put my clogs back on, left Suli still staring, and began my employment.

I was to be barmaid, and clean, and help the gardener and the cook. I liked the work. I could make pewter shine like silver, and I'd cooked for the whole Roadsoul camp. I'd never had a garden before, it was just spring and the world was all earth and glory; I dug about, turned up worms and roots and an old penny and bits of broken pots. Corn and collards sprang out of the earth like magic. The old gardener took off his hat and said, "I swear, Miss Corrie, you could call anything out of the earth." He stared at my breasts. "You could wake a dead man," he said.

I let it pass. When you're a barmaid you learn to. And Neely had her eye on me. When Dru Liddy from Hetch tried to sneak his hand up my leg she picked him up by shirt and britches and hove him out of the barroom herself.

I didn't mind. I was grateful, to tell the truth. And I liked Neely. I couldn't think why those other girls had quit.

Spring turned to summer. I washed windows and dug garlic and baked rhubarb pie. Suli caught a crow and wouldn't let me rescue her, though it was twice as big as she was and cawed and flapped; that night she came back, looking smug, and puked up bits of it next to me where I lay on the hearthstone.

"You bad cat," I said, and sat up. It was late; we had closed the house, Neely had gone to bed, and I had swept the hearthstone and lain down on it. That's what I did most nights, for though the storeroom floor was cold, that stone was always warm. I'd sweep it, and while Suli stared at whatever-it-was-she-saw I'd lie down with my cheek against the stone. My breath made a faint scent rise from it, like rain after drought.

Neely would have made me get up, but I made sure Neely didn't see me. I had my secrets. As it turned out, so did she.

I was pretty clear what my own secret was, but it drove me distracted. I could only figure out half of it.

The half I did know was: I liked men. Or boys, however you call them: those beings who smell so different and so good, who have deep voices and broad shoulders and cocks. I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted from them, but I wanted it with my whole body. More than my body. I wanted it

deep as the earth under that hearthstone, that had been there thousands of years rich and dark and wordless. Sometimes I'd lie on my belly on the stone *knowing* that if I wanted enough, if I just *longed,* I could draw whatever-it-was to me from sheer longing. It was waiting to spring up like collards. To spring up to me.

Of course I knew about sex. Hadn't I traveled with the Roadsouls? Wasn't I a bastard child? But for the first time I maybe understood how it had been for my mam, that she couldn't wait to be properly married. I thought I'd sink into that stone from sheer wanting.

Sex would be like that, I figured. Like *blending.* I thought I'd edge up on it and see. But I kept running into problems.

I kissed Ferd Harrow behind the woodshed. But his hands were cold, and he kissed wet; there must be some way to find that out beforehand. Jop Jarcy I wished I hadn't tried, for he raised chickens and that's what he smelled of. Lirri Barlissi put his hand between my breasts; I pulled it out, but not too fast. I was of two minds about men, if you understand—or one mind and two breasts—not always in agreement with myself. I put Dres Kimble's hand under my shift my own self, and yanked it away some time later none the wiser. Neely caught me yanking it away. She chased Dres out of the kitchen, came back and cuffed me. I held my ear and said, "You heard me tell him *Stop that!"*

"I did, Miss, and you meant it; but I want to see you use your fist, and mean that, too."

I appreciated the advice and used it on the bull-breeder's son, who knew what he was doing but looked to take about as long at it as the bull did. I barely got away, and then he hung around the house like a dog. I was glad my window was barred.

Neely let me know about *that.* "Are you a fool, Miss Corrie? If you let them kiss you, of course they'll want more."

Well, I wanted more myself. But not with *those* men. That was the part of the problem I couldn't solve. None of them had a *shine.* What each of them was, I could see right off. I knew what he'd say, and what he'd do; he'd get what he wanted, and I'd get a baby, and that would be that for the rest of my life. None of them would give me what *I* wanted: that dark, that down-deep, like the earth under the hearthstone.

None of them would give me what I wanted: that dark, that down-deep, like the earth under the hearthstone.

I knew I could find it. And I just *had* to. Summer was over, and autumn is so sad: The days get dark, the garden dies, the fruit falls. We began to serve dark ale. The reapers were at the roadhouse every night, in from the fields all rowdy and covered in chaff, and singing. When drunks sing, a girl can learn a lot.

One of them, a young blond laughing man, kept looking at me. Sometimes I looked back. He stayed late, past midnight; his comrades had gone and we were near closing, the cook had left and even Neely's husband had gone upstairs to bed. When I brought that young man his last pint he put his hand on my leg.

I ought to have hit him. I didn't. I just stood looking at him while he slid his hand under my skirt clear to his elbow.

Neely saw. I saw her see. I didn't care, I was so disappointed by his drunken *"Heh, heh!"* that was like any clod's, and at myself.

Neely roared, she trundled over and jerked me away. Then *he* roared and grabbed for me, there was a scuffle, Neely got him by the back of his dusty togs and hove him out the door. You could hear him cursing and laughing and shouting that he'd be back. Neely shut the door, took me by the upper arm and marched me back into the storeroom, onto the hearthstone.

Suli followed, and wreathed herself around my ankles as I stood my trial.

"And what have you to say, Miss?"

I started to cry. I couldn't help it. "I don't like them," I said.

"Don't *like* them? You let lads you don't like put their hands up your ass?"

"Halfway up." I wanted it clear. "It's somewhere in the middle of it I find out I don't like them."

"Sweet gods." She threw her arms in the air. "What have I done, hired some man-mad Roadsoul girl? You'd let any man feel you up. You'd let the man under that *stone* feel you up."

I said, "There's a man under the stone?"

We looked at each other. She blushed right up to her hair. Crossed her arms. Looked away.

So that was *her* secret. I thought how she'd hurled the reaper out by his britches. In a small voice I said, "Is it somebody you killed?"

"Killed!" She rolled her eyes and put her fists on her hips. "Under a stone forty men couldn't lift? Use your brains, girl." But she looked ashamed. "It's an old story. Nothing. That there's a man under it, laid down before time—thousands of years."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Because I had known it. I had known it all along.

"And have you wake at night, weeping and screaming? Like—" She stopped.

"Like the girls before me?"

"Yes. And I'm sorry you've found it out."

I'd walked back and forth on that man, and spilled soup on him. I'd skipped rope on him—and I was too old to skip rope. I'd danced on him all alone, I'd lain down on him and slept and dreamed. Suli had thrown up on him: the crow, and then two warblers, their beaks and little feet.

Neely said, "Are you afraid?"

"No." If he'd been going to be angry, the cat puke would have done it.

"Nothing's troubled you. If there's a man there let him lie. The men of this world are trouble enough," she said, "*which* you are doing your best to find out." She turned and stumped

off. I heard the clink of gathered mugs, the lamps blown out, the creak of the stairs under her big body.

Suli rubbed my legs. I picked her up and kissed her, set her back on four paws. She sat down and stared.

Not at me. She stared at the far edge of the stone.

I looked where she was looking, her ears forward like a kitten's, her gold eyes fixed.

Nothing there.

I took up the broom, nudged her off the stone, and began to sweep it. Because to knock on it, even to say, *Ahem!* or *Excuse me!* would be too abrupt, when a man had been sleeping for thousands of years.

I swept. Nothing happened. Suli didn't go off on her mouse hunt. She settled on her belly and shuffled her feet as if she stared at a trailed ribbon-end, but it was only the far edge of the stone.

I wet my lips. I said to that place, "You know you'd be welcome."

A brown hand crept up over the edge of the stone.

Suli pounced on it. It jerked back out of sight.

She looked for it. I said, "Suli!" She got that disappointed wrinkle on her forehead, the way she did when I took away a bird. To the place where the hand had been I said, "I'm so sorry. It was the cat."

I heard Neely upstairs, her weight made the floorboards groan. The hand crept up again. A forearm followed, was laid on the hearthstone, and a man pulled himself out of the earth until his chin rested on the back of his hand, like a swimmer pulling himself out of dark water.

Nothing else stirred. The lesser stones, the ones he rose from, did not move.

He was solemn and shaven and young. Dark, of course, with his hair clipped close. I pressed my hands together and said, "I hope it's not an imposition."

He frowned. Not a scowl, just the careful look of a man who doesn't quite trust the situation. But he pulled himself up further and leaned both forearms on the stone as if it were the bar of the roadhouse. He wore a russet-colored shirt of nice weave, not fancy, the cuffs rolled up.

I said, "Good evening." Then, "Good morning," considering the hour. "It's a pleasure to meet you." I picked Suli up. "I've got hold of the cat."

He climbed out then, and stood on the stone. He wore dark breeks, and his brown feet were bare. I wasn't disappointed; I wouldn't have known what to say to a prince. I said, "It's me."

He gazed as if he were Suli and I were the thing nobody else could see. His eyes were green, and he wore gold earrings. He stroked his mouth.

I held Suli against my breasts. I've never known what to do with people who can't sustain a conversation. Lots of men can't. Was he like the lads I knew, mute? *That* disappointed me. Petting Suli hard, I said, "It must be all right, or you wouldn't have gotten up at last. Like tulips," that every spring rise from under the ground, never so early that the frost kills them.

The cat still stared as if he were a squirrel. I shifted her to hang over my elbow and held out my hand to him, across the stone.

He took it.

I waited to see if I would die. I was frightened, but not horrified; for he wasn't cold, the flesh didn't hang off his bones, he didn't smell of corruption. His hand was warm and callused, and he had the fusty, friendly smell of a lad who has slept in his shirt.

Suli, hanging from my elbow with her paws out straight and her fur bunched under her armpits, said, *"Mow."*

"A kitten in this world of wolves."

The man brought my hand up and kissed the palm of it. His whiskers tickled, and his breath.

"Oh," I said, "can't you speak?"

He rubbed his mouth on my palm.

Neely's footsteps creaked across to the landing and started down the stairs.

I wasn't so stupid as to think she'd believe me if I said, "Him? Oh, that's the man from under the stone." Nor could I say to him, "It's the mistress, d'you mind going back under?" You don't wake somebody up after a couple thousand years and then say, "Nice meeting you." And his mouth was warm. Those doubting lips had begun to curl up at the corners.

I was in trouble.

It must have shown on my face, for he got a look like *Ah!* and dropped my hand. I clutched Suli, gestured with my chin toward the shadows behind the old beer barrels, meaning *Hide!*

But he stepped to the hearth. Anybody could see him. As Neely came boiling through the door he leaned one shoulder on the mantel and crossed his arms.

I thought, How could you? And I invited you!

Neely said, "And who are *you* talking to, young lady?"

I said nothing, because I was about to watch Neely take a ghost by his collar and backside and chuck him out the big front door. Then she'd beat me, and I'd be out of a job. Suli scrambled up to sit on my shoulder.

Neely glared. "Guilty!" she said.

What could I say? Dumbly, I nodded.

"Tcha!" She tossed up her hands. "A kitten. A *kitten* in this world of wolves." She surged across the storeroom. "When you've brought a lad to your bed, lass, learn to be a better liar, and *earn* your beating."

She strode past the hearth.

The man raised his eyebrows.

She stamped into my little room, threw the bedclothes about, looked under the bed. Came back, put her fists on her hips and said, "Where is he?"

I stood with my mouth open.

"You've brought a lad into the house," she said.

"I didn't." He was there already.

"I can see through your lies! It's that reaper lad you've got."

"It is *not!*"

The man from under the stone leaned on the mantel, hid his grin with one hand.

"You'll be honest with me, Miss. Who's to help you when he gets you with child and leaves you? What will

you do—put it out for the Roadsouls, the way your mammy did?"

Thus I saw the true heart she had, and that she loved me. She knew I would sleep with a man—that I would not be stopped from it. And she was ready to stand for me with him, and stand for the baby, to be sure it was not cast out the way I had been.

I began to cry. "Oh, Neely!" For she would have stood for me with any reaper, any hunter or merchant, even a Roadsoul. But I knew she wouldn't stand for me with a ghost—or a demon or a god, whatever he was, something she could not see, who even now stood at her elbow with his grin changing, maybe toward compassion.

"Where is he?" she said.

I said, "Neely, the only lover I've got stands here in this room."

It wasn't for her ears I said it. I wasn't such a kitten as she thought.

"Ah, you bad girl." But I could see she believed me. She laid on my cheek a slap that was half pat. "If you aren't sneaking lads in, then why aren't you? I'll see Ferd Harrow gets invited more often."

"Not *him*. He kisses wet."

She laughed her big laugh that could fill up the barroom. "Then I'll find you another. What's that cat staring at? Tell her to get to work."

I lifted Suli from my shoulder, and she scooted into the shadows. Neely went off, grumbling and chuckling, back up the stairway, then shuffling to her bed in the room overhead.

The man left the mantel and came to me. I took his hand, drew him into my little bedroom and shut the door.

I undid my gown. He pulled off shirt and breeks. He shone like gold taken from the earth. He leaned over me, I raised my arms around him and there it was: darkness deep as under stone, as the dirt that makes tulips.

For an instant I thought, What *is* the baby I'll get with him? For we would get one. A strange one, and I would have to explain it to Neely.

Starlight melted the window bars. In the room overhead the bed squeaked.

"You know how quiet we'll have to be," I whispered against his mouth. "Maybe it's all right that you can't talk."

"Teach me," he said.

Betsy James is the writer-illustrator of sixteen books. Her latest, *Listening at the Gate* (Atheneum, 2006), is a Tiptree Award Honor Book and a New York Public Library Best Book for Teens. She lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where hearthstones rest on the deep histories of the Southwest. Visit her on the web at www.listeningatthegate.com/.

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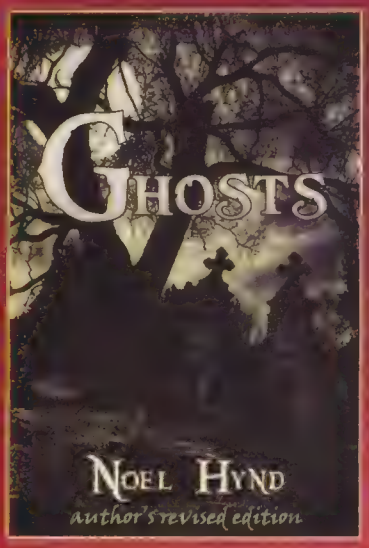

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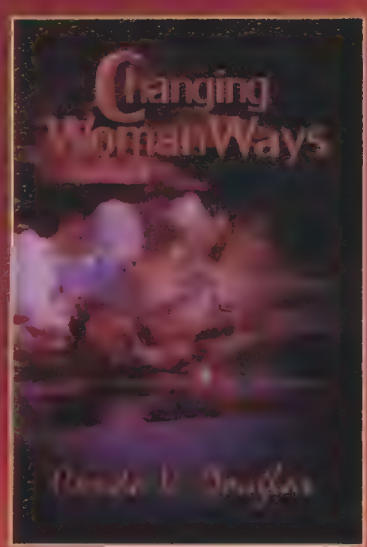


Barbie Marries the Jolly Fat Baker

by Nick Dichario

Illustration by Peter Ferguson

Are we really faced to remain as we were made, or can we change our natures and with them, the world?

"Prepare to die, Jolly Fat Baker," Paladin said.

"Your head is mine!"

The baker yelped and rolled off the princess, and in that unguarded, slovenly moment, Paladin saw the baker for the disgusting, corpulent doll he was. The way-too-tight pantaloons and orangey, clownish shoes. The sleeveless T-shirt under the white apron that left his chubby arms exposed like logs of dough. The plump, balled, cherry cheeks of an overstuffed barn boar. Paladin could barely stay his sword when he imagined the baker using his blubber to force the princess down onto the rug in front of little Miranda's toy chest, but Paladin's honor prevented him from slaying the baker while he lay helpless as a shoat. Come to think of it, his honor prevented him from doing many things he would like to do.

"Stand, you lump of lard, so I can separate your fat head from your obese body!"

The baker's plump legs fought to bring his feet under him, while Princess Barbie sat up straight and blinked anxiously, her tiny hands held daintily at her sides, her chin high, poised and dignified as always, befitting her royal station. The princess did not appear to be harmed, nor was her pink evening gown torn. Paladin, it seemed, had arrived in time to stop whatever indecency the baker had intended.

Paladin's sword trembled in his grip. He was a *Noble Knight of the Medieval Court* (according to his packaging). *Brave warrior, protector, slayer of dragons!* But Paladin had neither slain nor protected anyone since the day little Tony had ripped him from his cardboard box. In fact, he hadn't even been challenged. There were no dragons in the castle, no oversexed troubadours to keep clear of the princess, no Ken doll to eye suspiciously. G.I. Joe had a long history of post-traumatic stress disorder and pretty much kept to himself. But the Jolly Fat Baker? The devil! There was no way Paladin could have foreseen this.

The baker must have understood, then, that to stand was to lose his head. He stopped trying, held out his hands helplessly, pathetically, and begged, "Wait! Wait! Have mercy! I've done no wrong here, I swear it!"

"Your oath means nothing to me. If you refuse to stand and accept your fate with the dignity of a respectable doll, I'll simply behead you where you lie and be done with it."

The other dolls scattered: Madeline shrieked and leaped behind the TV stand. Trixieville and Annie Banana jumped inside the toy chest. Susi Cowgirl and Molly Moptop and the Good Witch Glenda skittered under the bed and poked their tiny noses out from the edges of the dust ruffle. Fancy Nancy ducked behind the beanbag chair. Paladin could see their small eyes blinking nervously from the shadows of their hiding places.

Princess Barbie rose gracefully to her feet and stood between Paladin and the baker. She crossed her arms in front of her and said, "That will do, Paladin. The Jolly Fat Baker will not be harmed."

> "Some affronts must not go unpunished."

Will not be harmed? It was just like Princess Barbie to plead for mercy. She was too kind. Paladin lowered his sword and bowed as decorum demanded. "With all due respect, m'lady, the protection of your reputation is my sworn vow. Some affronts must not go unpunished."

"The Jolly Fat Baker has not offended me," she replied.

"Excuse me, but I saw the baker on top of you with his flabby arm slung over your bosom—"

"I think you are mistaken."

"But—"

"What I meant to say, Paladin, is that you are definitely mistaken. You are *not* contradicting me, are you?" Her tone was sharp. The princess, no matter how kind she was, expected to be heard and obeyed.

"I beg your forgiveness."

"You are forgiven. Now I shall tell you what you actually saw. The Jolly Fat Baker was not on top of me, but beside me, although I confess he's so rotund you might not have been able to make the distinction. And the baker was beside me because I invited him to be there."

Paladin wasn't sure he'd heard correctly. What the princess had said, well, it simply could not be true. "Do I have your permission to speak freely?"

"Granted."

Paladin glared at the baker, who had managed to heave himself into a sitting position and was smiling obscenely. It took all of Paladin's strength not to lop off the fiend's noggin and kick it across the bedchamber. "Why are you protecting this...this...doll? He is not worthy to lick the dust from your slipper let alone lie beside you."

"Careful how you speak of the princess's consort," said the baker, his smile broadening.

Paladin raised his sword and took a threatening step forward. "I'll suffer not another of your impudent slurs!"

Barbie held out her slender arm to halt him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for you to find out this way. I had hoped to talk to you first."

"Talk to me about what?" Paladin asked.

"About..." the princess hesitated, took a moment to snug her gown and straighten her plastic tiara: "About our...about my... about my relationship with the baker."

"Relationship? Do you mean to say? Are you telling me? Am I to understand?"

"Yes."

Paladin stared at her, trying to determine if she was serious. To look at her was to fall in love with her all over again, he knew, so beautiful were her azure eyes, her slim shoulders and long legs and perky breasts, her tiny nose and golden hair and glabrous complexion. It was inappropriate for Paladin to notice these things, but sometimes he couldn't help it. She was perfect from head to furbelow. And yes, he decided, she was serious.

"How could you?" he said at last.

The baker climbed to his feet quite easily then. "She favors me!" he proclaimed in his booming voice. "I'm warm and soft like fresh dough, and I can give her things that you cannot."

Barbie held up her hand to silence the baker without a glance in his direction. She continued to gaze at Paladin, and he thought he saw in her a sea so deep, a sea so soft and sad and lonely that he might have drowned in the wealth of her watery soul had he not looked away.

"I love you, Paladin," she said kindly. "I'm sure you know this. But it is a courtly love, and according to the rules of our natures it can never be anything more than that. You are a fine companion, the finest friend a woman could ever want in this world, but there are times when courtly love, as wonderful as it is, simply cannot fulfill my needs."

Paladin could feel himself growing angrier by the second. Curse courtly love! It was the bane of his existence. It twisted his passion for Barbie into medieval codes of chivalry, forced him to remain above physical intimacy for the headier joys of romanticism and unfulfilled desire. Barbie was right, and he knew it. His very nature would allow him to do no more than woo her with his elevated sense of etiquette, his recitation of sonnets, and his discreet affirmations of love. And all his efforts had amounted to what? To the Jolly Fat Baker's unrefined, boorish, crude, unsophisticated, foul-mouthed manner winning the day—it was an outrage!

Paladin pushed aside his thunder.

"What about our evening strolls, our soulful discussions, all the thoughts and feelings we've shared with each other since... well...since the Christmas day you were brought into this castle? I remember the very moment little Miranda unwrapped you. I watched, hidden under the sofa, a gentle snow falling outside the castle windows, silver tinsel sparkling on the Christmas tree, cinnamon candles lit along the mantel, the grand hall filled with the smell of pine and sugar cookies. And there you stood, tall and proud and glistening behind the cellophane wrapper—"

"Ha, ha!" cried the baker. "That's so sticky-sweet I could roll it and bake it!"

Paladin moved forward dangerously.

"Our friendship doesn't have to change," Barbie said, placing one delicate hand over the coat of arms on Paladin's chest. "Nor should it. I still need you. In fact, my life would be empty without you. What is a princess without a knight? But I need the baker, too. He can hold me in his arms and make me feel warm inside. I need to feel that warmth. I need to feel like a woman, not just a lady."

"And this is how fatso makes you feel when he smothers you in his layers of flab?" Paladin asked, disgusted. "Like a woman?"

"Exactement!" The baker smoothed his pencil-thin mustache and stepped beside Barbie.

"Knave," Paladin scowled. "Degenerate. Scoundrel. Oaf. How dare you stand next to the princess. You are to remain at least one step behind her at all times."

"Oh, is that so?" sneered the baker. "Who's going to make me? You and what army?"

"Stop it!" Barbie commanded. "That's enough, both of you. I will have no more of this. Baker, from this day forward you will show Paladin the respect he deserves for being the princess's knight. Paladin, from now on you shall demonstrate your superior manners in the presence of the baker in hopes that he will one day learn from you. This is how it must be. I command it. Am I a hopeless fool to think this will work? It is up to all of us to demonstrate to the other dolls that our conduct is beyond reproach."

Paladin bowed his head slightly and said, "I am sorry, my princess, but this is not the natural order of things."

"Soon it shall be," she answered. "As it is improper for a princess to be seen alone in the company of a suitor with whom she is not betrothed, the baker and I are henceforth and officially engaged to be married."

Paladin could not believe what he was hearing. "But that means. Are you saying? Am I to understand?"

"Yes, Paladin," Barbie said. "The Jolly Fat Baker will be my prince."

The sudden sound of the children's feet tramping up the steps at a breakneck pace interrupted their conversation. A small mercy. If the children came into Miranda's room to play, the Little Death would fall upon the dolls, and for the first time in his memory Paladin wanted it to come and hoped never to wake from it. Sweet, forever death. A permanent end to this nightmare. That's what Paladin craved. Although he knew it was not to be, not for him or any doll, because death for a doll was not forever.

* * *

what is a princess without a knight?

When Paladin woke from the Little Death, he was lying on the bathroom floor with his left arm twisted behind his back, his right leg out of socket, and his sword stuck in the powdery sea-green bathroom rug.

The boy, Tony, must have carelessly tossed him aside during one of his legendary poops. Paladin could hear the toilet running. The stink of human waste hung in the air like something freshly gutted. He sometimes wondered what it would be like to be human, to have no choice but to grind food in his mouth, swallow it, and process the excrement out his anus to keep himself alive, but the thought disturbed him on such an elemental level that he could not think about it for very long.

Paladin shifted his weight onto his hip and tugged at his twisted arm. He notched his leg back in place and reclaimed his sword. The sword was undamaged, his breastplate intact, which was a vast improvement over the last time he'd come back to life, when he'd been stripped not only of his armor but his undergarments and his right hand. It had taken him two days to pull himself together after that debacle, eventually finding his slacks in the little girl's room, his hand in the basement, where Tabby was batting it about as if it were one of her infernal cat toys. Paladin had to fight her for it, an indignity for a knight of his caliber, finally chasing her off with a fierce blow from the flat of his blade to the tip of her nose. She'd spat at him on her way upstairs and accused him of being a "tight ass."

Paladin wasn't sure how long he'd been dead this time, but it didn't matter. The only thing he cared about was escape, a thought he never would have considered before—before Barbie had announced her plans to wed the Jolly Fat Baker. He knew there was no way he could stomach watching Princess Barbie marry and make prince such an arrogant, jiggling dunce, and then have to deal with the pair afterwards. It was too much to ask of even the noblest knight.

He peeked around the corner of the bathroom door, saw no one in the hallway, and heard muffled human voices from downstairs. He didn't want to be noticed. Being seen meant dying again, and who knew where he'd be dropped next time, and in what condition. He edged his way out of the bathroom, darted across the carpet, and shot down the hallway toward the staircase.

Once there he peered downstairs and saw Jake the dog wander past. He listened for a time. Everyone was home. He could hear the Mr. and Mrs. traipsing back and forth in the kitchen, preparing dinner and sipping wine as was their custom. The two children, Tony and Miranda, were in the living room jabbering and watching television. If he tried to make a break for it now, he would certainly be seen, which meant another Little Death.

Jake wandered back, stopped at the foot of the stairway, and looked up at Paladin. "Where the hell do you think you're going?" Jake asked.

"Nowhere."

"Right. You look like you're about to explode."

The damned dog was right. Explode was an understatement. Paladin understood, then, what it meant to feel the weight of the world upon one's shoulders.

Jake lumbered up the steps and sat beside Paladin on the landing. "It's Princess Barbie, isn't it? The wedding."

"You know?"

"News travels fast. Fancy Nancy is quite the gossip."

"I'm leaving the castle," Paladin said. "And I'm not coming back."

Jake was a big German shepherd with a black face and a thick coat of chocolate fur. He scratched behind his ear with his large paw and said, "That might seem like a good idea now, but believe me, it's no picnic out there. I ran away once. It sucked. On the outside it's survival of the fittest. You're hiding and starving and afraid for your life every minute of every day. If you get hurt or sick, you might as well be dead."

"It's different for dolls."

"Maybe in some ways, like you wouldn't have to worry about starving, I guess, or getting sick, but you'd have to worry about everything else, and I mean everything. How would you like to be crushed by a car, or chewed and mangled by a stray dog, or thrown into a garbage pail somewhere and buried alive in a landfill under tons of junk? I know all about your Little Death. If a human looks at you, there's nothing you can do to protect yourself. A hobo could pick you up and toss you in a fire pit to warm his hands. That would be the end of noble Paladin, brave warrior, protector and slayer of dragons. Just because you're a doll doesn't mean you're invincible. You'll get over Barbie, I promise."

Paladin sighed and rested his hand on the pommel of his sword. "I know that you mean well, old friend, but it's more than just Barbie. I've always wondered about things, about the mysteries of life, about the way the world works. Why is it that dolls can talk to dogs and cats, for example, but we suffer the Little Death when a human looks upon us? And why don't we *stay* dead? How is it that we don't have flesh and blood and bones like other living things, yet we have a kind of life anyway, a soul that beats like a heart? Why is it that when dolls are born—although I suppose born is the wrong word—we're given our natures and are beholden to them, and we can't change who we are no matter how hard we try? I'll never find answers to these questions if I'm stuck in here."

"One's nature is one's nature. It's an inescapable fact of life. I'm a German shepherd, right? Shepherds will always be remembered for guarding the Jews in Nazi Germany. Why couldn't we just say no to Hitler? Why couldn't we refuse to serve? Was it a weakness in our breed? That's what everyone consciously or subconsciously wants to know. How do you think that makes us feel? Maybe Jung was right. Maybe we're all tied to some universal collective unconscious. Or maybe we're acting out our archetypes. Regardless, thinking about it isn't going to help. You'll drive yourself nuts. This is what love gone bad does to us. It makes us question why things are the way they are. I've been there myself, back in the days when I had balls."

"Look, my mind is made up. Will you help me escape? I'll never get past the entire family. There are too many of them. If I wait until they all go to sleep, the doors and windows will be locked. I've never really thought about it before, but I'm trapped inside this castle."

"Funny how our homes become our prisons, eh?" Jake stood on all fours and sniffed the air. "Too bad. Pasta doesn't do much for me. I was hoping for chicken mango, or steak tartare, or maybe a taste of pork. God, when was the last time we had veal in this house? I think the Mrs. has gone vegetarian. All right, let's get this show on the road, shall we? Although, for the record, I'm against it. I think you're making a rash decision."

"Of course I am. It's the only way I'll go through with it." Paladin didn't want to so much as glance behind him down the hall. He was afraid that if he did he'd go back to her. His princess. His Barbie.

"Okay, ol' pal," Jake said. "Crawl underneath me and grab my kielbasa. You might as well take it for a ride. It's not good for much else these days except watering the lawn."

Paladin shimmied between Jake's legs and grabbed hold of the dog's furry chest. He didn't feel comfortable clutching Jake's kielbasa, but he was okay with wrapping his ankles around it, so in this way he held fast to the dog's underbelly.

Jake trotted downstairs and into the kitchen where the Mr. and Mrs. were talking and laughing and chopping vegetables. Paladin clung to Jake while the dog went directly to the kitchen door and barked. Like magic, the humans obeyed him and swung open the main gate to the outside world.

Just like that, the daring escape was over. For the first time in Paladin's life he was outside the castle walls. He lowered himself to the ground and stood in the tall grass. The smell of it filled his senses to bursting. The cars on the street roared past like lions. When he looked up, he saw long lines of silky clouds on a palette of popsicle-blue sky that went on forever and a day. A gentle breeze lifted his synthetic hair, and he felt the warmth of the sun on his rubbery skin.

"I ran away once. It sucked."

Paladin was free. It was glorious. It was terrifying. He was *free*.

"You're sure about this?" Jake asked.

Paladin nodded, not at all sure, but knowing it was something he had to do. He would miss Barbie, and she might miss him, too, but just as there was more to a princess's nature than courtly love, there was more to a knight's nature than to truckle a princess. There were journeys, adventures, and brave deeds in his future. He would set out upon a sacred quest to find answers to the unanswerable questions of a doll's life. He would set out to find the Holy Grail of dollhood: *What did it mean to be a doll?*

"Jake, you're a good friend and a fine dog, your ancestry be damned."

"Thanks, chum. If you come to your senses, just find your way home and wait for me out here. I make the rounds at least five or six times a day. I'll give you a lift back inside."

Jake raised his rear leg, tinkled on a patch of dandelions, and padded back to the castle.

* * *

At dusk, Paladin began walking fearfully through the grass toward the street. He decided to wait a short while longer until nightfall before leaving the yard, when there would be less chance of getting crushed by a car or spotted by a human.

He managed to stop himself from glancing back at the castle until twilight, when he took one final look at the only home he had ever known.

He saw little Miranda in the light of her bedroom window playing with Princess Barbie. The girl had dressed the princess in her imperial white wedding gown, a long silhouette trimmed in lace, with a princess-line bodice and plastic chips that sparkled like diamonds along its willowy cathedral train.

Barbie's eyes flashed in the glow of the light, but her eyes were dead to Paladin, just as Barbie was, and he was certain he would never see her again.

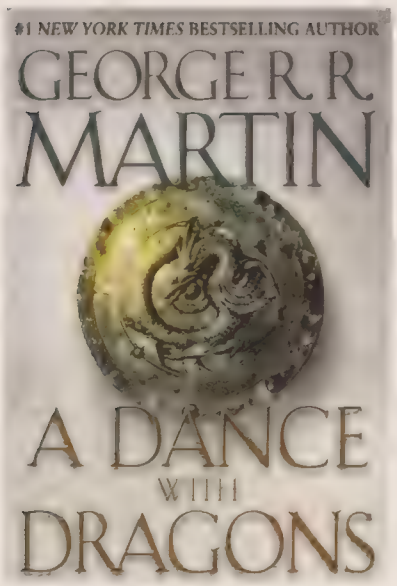
He turned away and ventured out into the vast, wide world, the thrill of the quest in his heart. And in that moment, he decided that perhaps dolls were not so different from men after all, for his only regret was that he hadn't lopped off the Jolly Fat Baker's head when he'd had the chance.

Nick DiChario has been nominated for two Hugo Awards and a World Fantasy Award. His stories have appeared in many magazines and anthologies, including *The Year's Best Science Fiction*, *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, and *The Best Alternate History Stories of the 20th Century*. His first two novels, *A Small and Remarkable Life* and *Valley of Day-Glo*, were both published by Robert J. Sawyer Books and received nominations for the John W. Campbell Memorial Award. In addition to his day job as a mild-mannered writer of corporate drivel, Nick contributes the occasional book and film review to *Philosophy Now* magazine and teaches creative writing workshops.

Books

by Paul Witcover and Elizabeth Bear

Winter is here. It's been a long wait—more than five years—since George R. R. Martin's *A Feast for Crows*, the disappointingly disjointed follow-up to *A Storm of Swords*, the third installment in Martin's epic *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. But now the summer of our discontent has turned to glorious winter with book five, ***A Dance with Dragons*** **(Bantam, hardcover, 1040 pp., $35.00, ISBN: 978-0-5538-0147-7).** For those who can't bear to wait a few more paragraphs, this is a much better book than its unfortunately amputated predecessor. Martin is back on top of his game, writing with evident joy—you can see it in his sentences, which often contain allusions to other works of art high and low: not to impress or confound readers, but simply, or such was my impression, out of playful exuberance—and you can see it in his renewed mastery of plot, which is all the more impressive in that his misstep in the previous novel has forced him to stitch the sundered pieces of his narrative chronology back together in such a way that leaves no scars and does not impede narrative flow. He not only does this—for the most part he makes it look easy.



Spoiler Alert: If you aren't up to date on the series, you may not want to read this review any further.

Martin has been hailed as the "American Tolkien," and while I'm sure his publishers are more than happy to place those words on his book jackets, the comparison is facile and misleading. If we are going to praise Martin—and believe me, I intend to—let's try to place his accomplishments in the proper context. Though Martin may share a pair of middle initials with the great English fantasist, and certainly no one would dispute Tolkien's influence, to call Martin the American Tolkien is to diminish him, as if he—if not epic fantasy itself—can only be measured against a scale established by Tolkien's prior example. But the aims and methods of the two writers, it seems to me, are broadly different.

Tolkien's fantasies grew out of his private linguistic, religious, and mythological obsessions—as Elizabeth Hand has convincingly argued, the world of Middle Earth is essentially outsider art that just happened, almost accidentally, and much to the author's surprise, to strike a spark with a wider public. This is not to disparage Tolkien's genius or his storytelling abilities. But I think what has made *Lord of the Rings* an enduring work of art is the impression it affords readers of tapping into a previously unknown or long-forgotten mother lode of raw myth whose potency remains undiluted. There is an authenticity to it all that does not seem the product of one man's imagination. To a receptive reader, encountering Tolkien for the first time is—or at least could be, before its carpetbagging imitators overwhelmed the bookshelves to such an extent that they polluted their own source, and then Peter Jackson put his distinctive cinematic stamp upon the original—a revelatory experience, and I mean that in the religious sense of the word. Tolkien's models were great national epics weaving myth and history together, such as the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*. Tolkien lamented the absence of such a unifying source in English culture and set out to provide it. It's hard to conceive of a more audacious and barmy ambition. There is something quintessentially English about it.

Martin, on the other hand, is an American born and bred. Not only a professional writer, which Tolkien was not, but a hard-bitten veteran of Hollywood. Let me go out on a limb and suggest that Martin's ambitions in writing *A Song of Ice and Fire* have nothing whatsoever to do with providing America its missing ur-mythology. I would guess his ambitions (with one exception) are not much grander than telling a good story—by which I mean a story readers will enjoy and he can be proud of—and making a few bucks along the way. And that's quintessentially American, it seems to me.

Further, Martin's secondary world may be an elaborate one, with deep political, cultural, and mythological backstory, but it is no Middle Earth. It is, in fact, a generic quasi-medieval setting, one more or less familiar from countless

other genre fantasies, though seldom as convincingly rendered in all its down-and-dirty aspects. Tolkien's quasi-medieval world, on the other hand, is alive with potent mythic energies; it positively seethes with them, to the extent that even his main characters are less individuals than they are expressions of an underlying mythos. Martin scrupulously avoids this. The fantastic elements of his narrative—the Others, dragons, skinshifters, Greenseers, gods and goddesses—are subservient to his characters rather than the other way around; myth, like magic, is something perceived as having largely departed from Martin's world. One of the arcs of the series is how, with winter, those things come back with a vengeance, like the return of the repressed. This movement is precisely the opposite of what occurs in Tolkien.

Take the supernatural out of *LOTR,* and there is no story. Take it out of *ASOIAF,* and you've still got a story—pretty much the same story. That is to say, the supernatural and all its manifestations, call them what you will, are less essential to Martin's story than to Tolkien's. They are the very heart of the latter; they are enhancements of the former. Tolkien was a mythmaker. Martin is a storyteller working in a particular tradition, a master craftsman who makes expert use of all the tools at his disposal. It's hard to appreciate just how strange and esoteric Tolkien's vision really is; the popular caricature of hobbits, elves, wizards, etc., has become too familiar, though if you look beneath the surface, you can still find it. There is nothing at all strange about Martin's vision. It comes right out of a popular tradition that includes but does not begin with Tolkien.

I think it's fair to say that Martin would probably never have written his books without the example and influence of Tolkien, but that said, his books strike me as repudiations or, if you prefer, corrections of Tolkien and especially of Tolkien's wider influence: they are a largely successful attempt to reclaim epic fantasy from the stultifying shadows of that influence. And here, if Martin does have grander ambitions for *ASOIAF,* is where they probably lie: in introducing more authentically American elements to an American epic fantasy, elements derived from writers like Howard, Leiber, Pyle, Lamb, and Lovecraft, among others, along with a peculiarly American sensitivity to that most peculiar of American institutions: slavery...and, of course, the equally peculiar and complementary American obsession with freedom.

For these reasons, and more, it would be a sad irony for Martin to be saddled with the soubriquet the American Tolkien. If there is such a creature, it is emphatically not George R. R. Martin.

In my review of *A Feast for Crows,* which appeared in this magazine several incarnations ago, I wrote of Martin's by-now infamous decision to split his story into two volumes on the arbitrary basis of geography: "A more perversely wrong-headed approach is hard to imagine. A novel is an organic whole; you can't perform this kind of radical surgery without dire results. Awkward lacunae and anticlimactic offstage business, sometimes even involving the death of characters—all evidence of literary amputation—deflate the dramatic impact and coherence of an already demanding plot, and it seems unlikely to me that the next volume will be able to redress these problems by filling in the gaps of this one."

While I continue to believe Martin's decision was a mistake, I'm happy to report that, contrary to my gloomy prediction, he has largely redressed the problems in *A Dance with Dragons.* As he writes in a brief introduction, "the two streams have once again rejoined each other."

This is not entirely true. While major characters like Tyrion, Jon, Brandon, and Daenerys, who were largely or altogether absent from *A Feast for Crows,* are back as viewpoint characters, some central storylines from that book—notably involving Samwell Tarly, Brienne, Catelyn, aka Lady Stoneheart, and Sansa and Littlefinger—are missing entirely from this one, and characters like Jaime, Arya, and even, at least for most of the book, Cersei, are present but more peripheral than readers might have expected or hoped. So it seems that the "two streams" won't be fully reintegrated until the next book, *The Winds of Winter*—which I fervently hope is not another five years away.

As has been reported, the novel features no less than sixteen major point of view characters (a total of eighteen altogether, including prologue and epilogue). Bran's journey beyond the Wall, and what he finds there, is part of this book, but Martin is sparing with his revelations on that score, probably saving them for the next volume. Arya's experiences as an assassin in training are also carried forward, but it is plain from a plot standpoint that she, too, is being held in reserve. There are a substantial number of chapters from the point of view of Reek, aka Theon Greyjoy, former ward of Ned Stark, conqueror of Winterfell and betrayer of the family, now the pathetic plaything of the demented bastard Ramsay Snow, by royal edict a bastard no longer but still a sadistic monster by any measure. Theon, it seems, or what's left of him, still has work to do in Martin's incredibly complicated, astonishingly deft weave of plots and subplots. Davos Seaworth, the

Hand of King Stannis, also returns, and Prince Quentyn Martell of Dorne finally steps onstage in a big way as he travels to the city of Meereen in quest of "fire and blood." Ser Barristan Selmy, dismissed from the Kingsguard but now serving Daenerys, also emerges as a viewpoint character, and an exceptionally strong one: I had been dismissive, even contemptuous, of this upright old knight, considering him to be a useful idiot whose conceptions of honor had calcified his moral sensibilities, but Martin makes him a mightily compelling figure—one has the sense he is being groomed for a fine death. And speaking of which, let's not forget another difference between Tolkien and Martin: of the Fellowship of the Ring, only one, Boromir, was dead at the end of the epic. Martin's cast of major characters has already been winnowed far more considerably, and more deaths lie ahead. Martin has established in previous volumes that readers can't take the survival of anyone for granted. In *Star Trek,* the away-team character with a red shirt was often slated for death. By that standard, every character in *ASOIAF* wears a red shirt, and that includes the three who command the lion's share of chapters here: Tyrion, Jon, and Daenerys.

The absence of this trio from *A Feast for Crows* was keenly felt. All are with justification among the most popular of Martin's creations. One senses that Martin is damned fond of them himself, because while his prose is never less than muscular and engaged, it really sparkles in the service of these three. And that, I think, quite simply, explains why this is a better book than its predecessor, structural issues aside.

Tyrion, readers may recall, suffered a grave betrayal at the end of *A Storm of Swords* that culminated in the murder of his concubine, Shae, and his father, Tywin. Now we follow him across the Narrow Sea, to the city of Pentos, where he finds a friend of sorts in the wealthy merchant Illyrio Mopatis, an associate of Varys the Spider who intends to deliver the dwarf to Daenerys, presently ensconced in the city of Meereen. Tyrion, haunted by memories of his father's betrayal, has fallen into passivity, content to drink himself into oblivion; but circumstances will soon awaken his wit and his scheming mind, for the path to Meereen will not be a straight one, and it will take all his considerable cunning and a great deal of luck besides to survive the adventures and humiliations that fate—or should I say Martin—has in store. I can imagine Peter Dinklage, the talented actor who plays Tyrion in the HBO series, reading these chapters with deep satisfaction and hunger, hoping the series continues long enough for him to enact Martin's masterful scenes.

Meereen is a kind of gravity sink in this book: it pulls characters far and near toward it, and it also proves very difficult for characters already there to escape. This, no doubt, is the famous "Meereenese Knot" that Martin has referred to in various blog posts over the past few years. One can readily see that it posed a problem. The brisk narrative pacing slows to a crawl in this claustrophobic city, where Daenerys is stuck, beset from within by smiling enemies who strike by night and from without by those eager to roll back her victories and the emancipations that accompanied them. Two of her dragons she has imprisoned, afraid of their penchant for human flesh, and the third and greatest, Drogon, has flown off to fend for himself; without her dragons, the living symbols of her power and authority, Daenerys suddenly seems vulnerable, and her enemies are not slow to strike. The swirl of intrigue and insincerity surrounding the passionate young queen, who is yet more innocent than she likes to believe, is at times as wearying and confusing to readers as it must be to Daenerys herself. But I don't feel Martin has gone astray here; rather, he is accurately communicating the trap that Daenerys has fallen into, partly through the machinations of others and partly through her own decent impulses, which while morally admirable do not advance her armies or the cause for which she raised them: namely, returning to Westeros and winning back the throne of her ancestors. The temptations of the flesh, and of realpolitik, also raise their heads in this volume, as Daenerys, ever wary of betrayal, yet seemingly looking for it in all the wrong places, finds herself yearning for someone to replace Khal Drogo in her bed if not her heart.

The choices facing Jon Snow, now Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, are equally unpalatable and fraught with danger. Mance Rayder's invading force may have been defeated, but the remnants are reforming, threatening to attack again. Meanwhile, Jon's victory has not eliminated the grumblings over his elevation to command; both from within the Night's Watch and from the knights of self-proclaimed King Stannis, voices are raised against Jon's policy of seeking to win the Wildings over in order to gain their help in defending the Wall against the inevitable attacks of the Others. This is viewed by many as naïve if not downright treasonous, though Jon points out that any dead Wildings on the far side of the Wall must rise as undead enemies in thrall to the Others. For his part, Stannis is not sure whether Jon is an ally or an enemy in his quest to claim his brother Robert's throne, since Jon sticks resolutely to a position of neutrality in which his service is owed to the realm

as a whole, and to humanity itself, rather than to any king. This high-minded approach, all too reminiscent of the kind of thinking that led his father and brother to their bloody ends, makes the tightrope Jon must walk all the more slippery. Lady Melisandre, priestess of R'hllor, who has already bent Stannis to her will, now sets her sights on Jon, courting him not with offers of power but with prophecies about his missing sister Arya. Melisandre is obviously not to be trusted, yet she comes across as far less malevolent in this volume than previously, though still quite deadly. When Stannis leads his army south, to confront the Boltons amidst the ruins of Winterfell, Melisandre remains at the Wall, adding her sparks to the tinderbox of smoldering resentments and barely repressed hostilities that threaten to overwhelm Jon's fragile authority and decimate humanity's defenders long before the Others come against them in earnest.

While there are no sequences in this novel that compare to Martin's two most brilliant stretches of sustained writing so far, the incredible set-piece Battle of the Blackwater and the almost unbearably tragic Red Wedding, there are several scenes that readers are not likely to soon forget. I know that in the days since I finished reading the novel, I have found a handful of such scenes playing out in my mind over and over again, and each time something new reveals itself to me—either some fresh detail or a plot implication I had not fully appreciated at first. I love the opening credits of the HBO series, not just for their striking effects but because their depiction of Martin's world as a vast and intricate machine is fully borne out in the scope and precision of his plot, whose wheels and gears mesh beautifully but without mercy as they advance toward a climax and conclusion still far off yet close enough now to be present there between the lines, like the first distant glimmerings of spring discernible even in the depths of winter.

Reviewed by Paul Witcover.

Anyone would be forgiven for believing that zombie novels must have jumped the shark by now. Or for wishing that were the case even if they haven't. But damned if Daryl Gregory hasn't rung some cool changes on the "differently living" in his third and so far finest novel, ***Raising Stony Mayhall*** **(Del Rey, trade paperback, 448 pp., $14.00, ISBN: 978-0-3455-2237-5).** Richly imaginative, surprisingly funny, both grippingly and sensitively told, the novel is by turns nostalgic, grim, and redemptive. It's got real crossover potential, yet it will also satisfy the most demanding zombiephiles. This is a book that has brains...and eats them, too.

The novel begins and ends in the year 2011, with short sections that function as a prologue and epilogue, but the bulk of the action takes place between 1968 and the present, when a zombie outbreak in the Eastern United States killed almost 75,000 people in less than twenty-four hours and very nearly escaped all efforts to contain it. Since then, the United States—indeed, the whole world—has lived under a suspended death—or, rather, undeath—sentence, for so fast is the spread of whatever it is that creates zombies (communicated in the traditional fashion via the bites of those infected), the odds of controlling a second outbreak, especially one that erupts in multiple locations around the country or the globe, is vanishingly small. The national security state that America has become in order to deal with this ever-present threat has obvious parallels to the War on Terror—and that is not the only parallel that Gregory draws with casual confidence. America has always had a fraught relationship with the Other, and what is more Other—yet simultaneously more the same—than zombies? They are terrorists, gays, illegal aliens, and racial minorities all rolled up into one.

Gregory's zombies are fast zombies. They are also smart zombies. The virus (or whatever it is that makes them) turns them into mindless undead brain addicts for only twenty-four to forty-eight hours; after that, they're back to normal... well, except for the being dead part. And, though restored to their right minds, their saliva still retains the ability to pass on the affliction.

But the real story Gregory is telling is not the traditional zombie apocalypse but instead, as his title implies, the story of one zombie: John "Stony" Mayhall. Stony, so named by his adopted family on account of his gray skin tone, is discovered as a baby in the arms of his mother's corpse, half-buried in an Iowa snowbank.

The Mayhalls raise Stony in secrecy. No one in the town of Easterly knows of his existence except for the Cho family, Korean immigrants whose young son, Kwang, becomes Stony's best friend as he is growing up. The section of the novel dealing with Stony's childhood, from 1968 through 1982, is simply superb, with all the nostalgic charm yet sinister undertones of something by Ray Bradbury. But this idyllic interlude comes to a sudden and violent end.

Hunted by the government, Stony finds

shelter and fellowship with the zombies of the LDA, or Living Dead Army, survivors of the initial outbreak. Here he makes the acquaintance of Mr. Blunt, a zombie whose body parts have been replaced by a veritable junkyard of wooden, plastic, and metal prosthetics—all of which he mysteriously, effortlessly controls as if they were the real thing. Blunt becomes a father-figure of sorts to Stony, initiating him into a spiritual or perhaps even supernatural side of zombiehood that Stony, because of his own peculiar history, embraces.

Here, too, he meets Commander Calhoun of Commander Calhoun FishStix, a Colonel Sanders-like multimillionaire tycoon who is secretly a zombie himself, and who is using his vast fortune to purchase the zombies their own island, from which he intends to reveal their existence and peaceful intentions to the world at large.

Gregory's story from here out becomes episodic, a bildungsroman in which Stony is exposed to a variety of characters and settings, most notably Dr. Weiss, the scientist in charge of research at Deadtown, the supersecret, supermax prison where zombies are kept for study by the United States government. Some of the most harrowing episodes of the novel take place there, during Stony's long incarceration...from which he escapes in time to play a central role in Calhoun's scheme. To say more would reveal too much.

But I will say that the ending of *Raising Stony Mayhall* is as fresh and unexpected as anything that precedes it. Gregory both embraces his pulp subject and transcends it.

Reviewed by Paul Witcover.

Daniel Marcus's slim coming-of-age novel, ***A Crack in Everything*** **(Apodis Publishing, trade paperback, 235 pp., $14.95, ISBN: 978-0-9738-0475-1),** is meticulously grounded in a specific time and place: the Delaware shore, early 1990s. I can personally vouch for the authenticity of this portrait, as I've spent many months there, at all seasons of the year, from the '60s until today. Marcus absolutely nails the strange, more than slightly surreal vibe of the Delmarva Peninsula, an in-between locale that is neither North nor South precisely but partakes of elements of both, and is poised as well between a rural, agriculturally based economy and a seasonally driven service economy dependent on vacationers from DC, Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. In Marcus's capable hands, the sandy stretch of shore along Route 1 between Lewes and Bethany Beach becomes a halfway point between the living and the dead, humans and gods, magic and the lack of it, in which categories normally kept apart promiscuously commingle, bleeding into each other in unexpected ways that bring the cosmic down to earth and raise the mundane to the heavens.

The novel's title and epigraph are drawn from the Leonard Cohen song "Asylum": "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." And there is little in this book, from setting to characters, that is not damaged physically, psychologically, or emotionally, in some cases all three at once, beginning with the Lambent family, Maggie and Gene, and their two children, Gabe, a teenager, and his younger sister, Ariel.

The family, from Philadelphia, has come to the Ocean View RV Park for their annual summer vacation. Gene, who has been swilling beer and schnapps all the way, drops his family at their trailer and promptly leaves for the liquor store—where he drives right through the plate-glass front window, landing himself in the hospital, in a coma.

Even before this alcohol-fueled accident, the Lambents have been a fractured family. Maggie, a recovering alcoholic, has been unable to break free of Gene or to get him to quit or moderate his drinking. Gabe, a smart, sensitive boy whose chief form of recreation is reading, specifically the Pellucidar novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs, is more in danger of following in his father's footsteps than he or Maggie realizes, even as he consciously seeks to escape Gene's baleful influence. But the accident introduces new stresses, new fractures.

Gabe is one of three main viewpoint characters. The others are Maggie and the comatose Gene. From his hospital bed, Gene relives the previous twenty years of his alcohol-saturated relationship with Maggie. Marcus serves up pivotal incidents in crystalline flashbacks that pack an emotional punch reminiscent of *Days of Wine and Roses*, the 1962 classic depicting the harrowing descent of a husband and wife into alcoholism. That film, for all its power, seems histrionic now, but the doomed trajectory of Maggie and Gene, set against a soundtrack from the early punk years, reads like a grimly accurate roadmap to hell by someone who has first-hand experience of the route.

Little by little, bits and pieces of Gene's dream memories begin to intrude either physically or sensorially into the daily lives of Maggie and Gabe. These uncanny manifestations are frightening and dangerous, as if the comatose

Gene has begun to haunt his family, grasping at them as greedily as he once grasped at bottles, and with the similar intention of draining them dry.

These supernatural incidents seem to be associated with an archetypically white-bearded man named Otto Nye, who is vacationing in a neighboring trailer at Ocean View with his peculiarly vacant yet intermittently malevolent wife, Mary. Otto befriends Gabe, becoming a somewhat seedy avuncular presence, not so much a countervailing weight to Gene's absence as a source of ambiguous instruction that may guide the confused boy toward light or darkness. He is explicitly identified with trickster figures, demonstrating magical if not divine abilities that he begins to teach to Gabe, who is repulsed and enthralled in equal measure by this larger-than-life character who screws young girls under the nose of his wife, casually conjures killing tornadoes, and enjoys playing the ponies. What boy would not want some of that power for himself? Maggie, overwhelmed with her guilt and rage toward Gene, and struggling to resist the whispers of her addiction, is in no position to intervene, and Gabe is left to find his own way.

I did feel that the novel moved too quickly toward resolution. I was left wondering what it was about these particular people that made them the focus of supernatural attention; in all other respects, they seemed quite ordinary, yet the author explicitly indicates that they have been singled out. Yet in fairness, I don't think Marcus was interested in tying things up neatly. Like the family that is its subject, this novel is flawed. But plenty of light shines through the cracks.

Reviewed by Paul Witcover.

Brian Ruckley, known for his epic fantasy trilogy *The Godless World*, turns to a gothic mix of horror and alternate history in his enjoyable new novel, ***The Edinburgh Dead*** **(Orbit, trade paperback, 368 pp., $14.99, ISBN: 978-0-3160-7996-9).** Set in the title city, in the first and second decade of the nineteenth century, the novel contains some genuine historical personages, such as, for example, Sir Robert Christison, a prickly medical man who assists our hero, Adam Quire, a sergeant in the police force and a psychologically scarred veteran of the Napoleonic Wars.

Quire is portrayed as damaged goods, a thinking man with a thin skin and a short fuse: attributes that served him well in the war but which proved less suited to success in peacetime...at least until, with the help of his mentor, James Robinson, the Superintendent of Police, Quire found a second career on the Edinburgh force. Though even there he does not fit in, thanks not only to his independent habits of thought and action but to a stiff-necked pride that, especially when confronted by the combination of superior rank and stupidity, verges on insubordination.

So the knives are already out for Quire, politically speaking, when the novel opens with the discovery of a badly mauled corpse in a shabby Old Town street. The only clue to the identity of the victim—or perhaps the killer—is a snuff box that leads Quire to a gentleman by the name of John Ruthven...who in turn is able to identify the corpse as that of one Edward Carlyle, who had been in Ruthven's employ for some time, before absconding with a number of his possessions, the snuff box apparently included.

Yet Ruthven's manner—to say nothing of his companions, a surly servant named Blegg and a Frenchman called Durand—rouses Quire's instincts. The game is soon afoot (the novel abounds with atmospheric echoes of Conan Doyle and other masters of gothic detection), leading Quire into the unsavory world of the grave robbers also known as resurrection men—a term that is also a tip of the hat to Ian Rankin's detective novels featuring Inspector Rebus, another strong influence here.

The most famous Edinburgh resurrectionists were the notorious pair Burke and Hare, whose depredations crossed the line from stealing bodies for medical research to outright murder. Ruckley incorporates them as characters, to appropriately grisly effect.

Ruckley's resurrectionists are aptly named, for the corpses they steal soon reappear, animated with fresh life, though seemingly little intelligence. Quire suspects the involvement of Blegg, which in turn points to Ruthven...but the man is wealthy and respected, and is soon using his considerable influence against Quire.

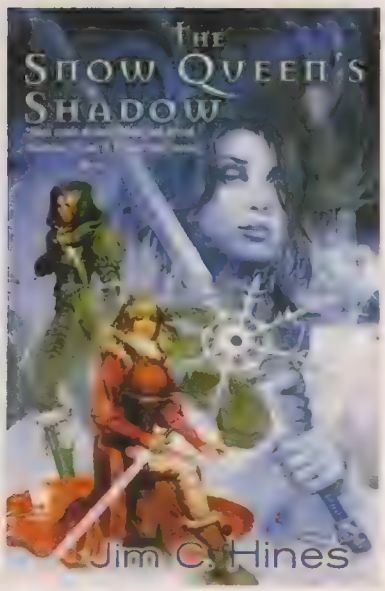
Quire, however, has allies of his own—albeit less high on the social ladder. With the aid of Agnes McLaine, a sort of urban hedge witch, he sets himself against dark powers he can barely credit and understands not at all. Yet neither do his adversaries comprehend the bulldog nature of the man whose suspicions and then personal enmity they have roused, though flashbacks to Quire's active service leave readers in no doubt of his formidably violent capabilities.

The result is a somewhat familiar if energetic novel that stands out less for its supernatural elements—those are competently done—than

for Ruckley's talents at conveying up-close-and-personal mayhem, and for his main character's intriguingly dark qualities. I suspect we have not seen the last of Sergeant Adam Quire.

Reviewed by Paul Witcover.

The Snow Queen's Shadow **(DAW, mass market paperback, 352 pp., $7.99, 978-0-7564-0674-5)** is the fourth and final book in Jim C. Hines's fairy tale princess deconstruction that began with The Stepsister Scheme. In this series, the author has asserted that he meant to ask the question: "What happens after Happily Ever After?" His characters are versions of the Disney princesses: Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White, all intentionally recast in a more realistic mode.



They're all survivors of catastrophe—which Hines handles nicely—and they have grown up to be adventuresome heroines with their own agendas and goals. But they remain in some ways true to their animated beginnings. For example, Danielle (Cinderella) has the ability to talk to animals—and they will help her.

Hines has written their previous adventures in an action-movie-inspired style, with big splashy magic and a great deal of banter. There are fairy godmothers (good and bad), lingering enchantments, and lurking monsters galore—but there's always been a tonal sense, with these books, of a bright, four-color rendering. Even when things got bad for the characters (and they have, on occasion, gotten very bad indeed) there was always a Raiders of the Lost Ark-style sense of fun.

In some ways, I think that tone—which carries over—works against this book. The Snow Queen's Shadow is a very dark narrative. It begins with the death of a beloved queen and follows through tragic consequences including (but not limited to) war, demonic possession, torture, mass murder, and one death in particular that's inevitable from the beginning, but still wrenching. At times, I found myself disconnected from the story by that variance of tone and content.

Since the book is structured as a chase narrative, it also suffers from the sense of being drawn out or padded, which can afflict such works. The middle of the book bogs down a little as our heroes run from place to place, always a minute or two behind, and very little of the status quo actually changes.

Those complaints aside, however, there's also a great deal to like here. Hines's world is peopled with strong and realized women who have their own agendas, lives, and relationships. They are all passionate and all differentiated, and it's interesting to watch them navigate the structures of compassion and ruthlessness that form the major thematic freight of this book. Hines handles that thematic development well: he's got a great metaphor in his demonic possession for how even good men and women can contain horrid monsters within them, and he plays nicely—and without pedantry—on the issue of how much of the work of being a decent human being is keeping those monsters in check.

The end result is that a lovely moral uncertainty emerges, and the inevitable ending is enormously emotionally affecting. There are times when even the most heroic characters choose ruthlessness, but it's not a Hollywood sort of ruthlessness that leaves the audience cheering at a room strewn with corpses. Nor does he err on the side of naiveté. Rather, Hines shows why a given character makes any decision, and leaves the judgments to the reader.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Bear.

Reality Skimming in 2011-12
okalrel.blogspot.com
Ethics in SF ... and more

Gaming reviews continued from page 33

Graham Bottley and Cubicle 7 has introduced a new edition of the game called *Advanced Fighting Fantasy*.

This new edition retains the simplicity of the original rules, but modifies the game in other ways to accommodate the expectations of today's gamers: a "Talent" system allows players to better define their characters in terms of expanded capabilities and areas of expertise, and a point-based character creation method refines these options even further. Even dungeon creation has become a simpler affair. Bottley introduces a map creation method, which involves dropping a handful of six-siders on graph paper, that works a lot better than one might think.

This being said, most of the game's old rules have remained intact and untouched, and sometimes that's a problem. Rolling for weapon damage requires consulting an individual table for each weapon, with an identical method used to calculate damage absorbed by armor. While I fully respect including these legacy rules as an aesthetic choice, I can't help think it bogs down the flow of play.

These minor quibbles aside, *Advanced Fighting Fantasy* delivers a rules light, but surprisingly robust, gaming experience that harkens back to the golden years of the hobby. **Reviewed by Matt Staggs.**

***Book of Drakes*, Open Design LLC, softcover, $19.99, ISBN: 978-1-9367-8105-8, www.KoboldQuarterly.com.**

Dragons are great monsters, and a staple of fantasy roleplaying games. What they aren't, though, are mysteries. Most gamers have run into their fair share of dragons, and pretty much know what to expect (probably a Total Party Kill). If you're a gamemaster who has been looking for a new and surprising way to introduce a little draconic mayhem into the lives of your jaded players, then Open Design's new *Book of Drakes* (an accessory, written for use with the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game)* is the perfect book for you.

Authors Adam Daigle and Mike Welham have taken the dragon's underutilized, smaller cousin, the drake, and expanded it into a powerful, complex creature able to mystify, vex, and even protect characters of all levels. These drakes come in dozens of varieties—paper drakes, smoke drakes, even the garrulous alehouse drake—that will leave even longtime gamers scratching their heads in confusion... or laughing in amusement. In the hands of the authors, drakes step out of the darkness to be revealed as serious foes and valuable allies. *Book of Drakes* also introduces a new drake-oriented class, the Drake Tamer, as well as new spells and feats that involve these little dragons.

Book of Drakes features some of the best artwork I've seen from Open Design, with full-color depictions of drakes, from charming to sinister, and if you're anything like me, by the time you finish the book you'll probably want to own your own pet drake as much as you want to use one in your game. **Reviewed by Matt Staggs.**

***Final Fantasy III*, by Squaresoft, published by Square Enix**

ESRB rating: 10+, 800 Nintendo Points; formats available: Nintendo Wii Virtual Console

Format reviewed: Nintendo Wii Virtual Console

It has been seventeen years since the North American debut of *Final Fantasy III* (originally titled FFVI in Japan), but to old fans and newcomers, the Wii Console port of this classic RPG is still one of the greatest video games of all time. *Final Fantasy III* took its narrative seriously at a time when video games were lucky if they had any narrative at all. The story follows Terra, a young magic-user in a world where magic was long thought dead, on a globe-trotting journey to vanquish the oppressive empire that enslaved her. Her quest introduces her to an impressive array of characters—a mouthy thief, a playboy king, and a white-furred winged dancing creature called a moogle, and those are just the characters she meets in the first hour of the game. There are fourteen playable characters in all, each with as rich a backstory as Terra. They all get their turns at center stage during the sixty-plus-hour game; the heroes grow, form bonds with each

other, and conquer their inner demons. Despite these rich and loveable characters, the villain steals the show. Kefka, who seems to be only the emperor's lackey but becomes something much more sinister, has elements of Saruman and Batman's nemesis, The Joker. I have written at length about Kefka's status as one of the greatest villains in the history of gaming at Tor.com. [www.tor.com/blogs/2011/04/top-five-greatest-video-game-villains]

Final Fantasy III was one of the great fantasy stories of the 1990's published in any medium. In addition to the tightly knit plot and compelling characters, what really makes the game stand out is the way it blends elements of fantasy and science fiction. The game features swords and magic and dragons, yes, but also airships, castles that can burrow underground, auto-crossbows, and bio weapons. A characteristic of the game often unmentioned is its use of steampunk before it was popular. *Final Fantasy III* is not afraid to mess with the player's expectations or rip the player's heart out, as would top-notch fantasy novelists like George R. R. Martin or J. K. Rowling. Just when players think the characters are on the right track, a shocking event scatters the party. Some characters die nobly, others tragically, and some beloved friends may be lost and (without a strategy guide) never found.

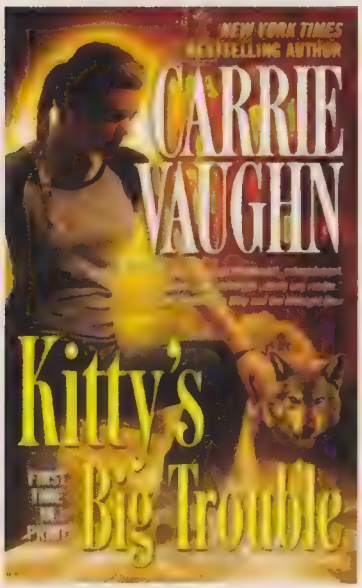
Of the game's many ports over the years, the new Wii Console version may become the favorite of purists. Gone are the CG cutscenes and bonus dungeons of earlier remakes. Only minor gameplay upgrades, like the revised Save system, have been added.

Gaming reviews continued on page 81

by Elizabeth Bear

In this bimester's column, and completely by accident, of the three books we review, two of them owe a debt of homage to Kurt Russell, and at the same time two of these three also revolve around vampires in San Francisco.

In the latest in Carrie Vaughn's popular werewolf series, ***Kitty's Big Trouble*** **(Tor Books, mass market paperback, $7.99, 320 pp., 978-0-7653-6565-1)**, Kitty and her entourage wind up embroiled in ancient politics and magic under San Francisco's Chinatown. [Editor's note: For you non-movie buffs, Kurt Russell starred in the movie *Big Trouble in Little China,* from which this book takes its title; Russell also portrayed Wyatt Earp in the movie *Tombstone*—see following.]



Kitty-the-werewolf's titular trouble begins when she becomes interested in the history of supernatural creatures, and that various historical figures—specifically, General William Tecumseh Sherman (potential werewolf) and U.S. Marshal Wyatt Earp (alleged vampire hunter)—may have been involved in the supernatural. She's a radio talk show host, and attempts to use that platform for research, but finds herself stymied. Instead, a cross-country road trip, for a little original-sources research and amateur archaeology, uncovers a starving vampire somehow leftover from Earp's nineteenth-century purge of a nest of frontier bloodsuckers.

Kitty and her pack (her husband Ben and their ally, the monster-hunter Cormac) scarcely survive that encounter when they receive a call for assistance from another old ally, the Chinese vampire known as Anastasia. She's in San Francisco, and it's here that the main plot kicks into gear, as Kitty, Ben, and Cormac must find a way to assist Anastasia in preventing a very old rogue vampire, known to most as "the Roman," from getting his hands on an ancient artifact of great power. This is more than yet-another-move in the "Long Game" that the vampires play to while away the centuries. Rather, it's an existential threat.

It turns out that the Roman was also responsible for the nest of vampires that Earp failed to entirely exterminate, a plot complication that felt a little forced and coincidental to me. A good deal of the book is devoted to developing the backstory of a number of recurring series characters, so the book may be more rewarding for returning readers. However, it is a nice, compact adventure overall.

Vaughn's a skilled writer, and has provided a well-paced, breezy outing with few missteps. The tour of the imagined world under Chinatown is intriguing, bringing in deeper layers of Chinese legend and myth than are usually examined in Western fantasy—and some of the new characters she introduces really caught my fancy. I found Sun and Grace, in particular, extremely charming.

Ex-con Cormac's attempts to keep within the letter of his parole add a nice touch, and I thought Vaughn did a good job with the sense of numinousness that infuses the last hundred pages of the book. This is not a life-changer of a novel—but it's an entertaining action story, and it held my attention quite well on a very long plane flight.

* * *

Slightly less successful is ***Hellbent*** **(Spectra, trade paperback, 352 pp., $15.00, 978-0-3455-2062-3)**, Cherie Priest's second novel featuring vampire cat burglar Raylene Pendle and her misfit crew of allies and friends. While it is also breezy, with an enjoyable voice, I had a few more reservations about this book.

In this novel, Ray first accepts a commission from a sleazy antiques dealer to steal a humidor full of magical bacula—that is to say, penis bones. She arrives to find that the bones have already been stolen (by someone else) and are being used for nefarious purposes.

Meanwhile, her friend Ian, a vampire blinded in a secret medical laboratory, is being threatened by the San Francisco vampire House (clan), that he's long abandoned. His father (in the vampiric sense) has been killed, and as Ian is an heir to the House, he could be construed as a threat to the new administration—who do not know of his maiming, because for vampires to

show weakness is to invite the other predators to attack.

This was the one bit of vampire worldbuilding that I really enjoyed. Otherwise, Priest's vampires come across more as superheroes with very few limitations than as denizens of the night. Even a severe allergy to daylight (they do burst into flames quite satisfyingly) doesn't seem to slow them down much—they take airplanes and so forth like normal people.

I also had some issues with vampire powers that seemed to vary in intensity as the plot demanded (Ray can't smell blood through a closed door, but she can smell the electronics in a security system) and with the ragged pacing of the early sections. Some of this is attributable to the two plot threads, neither of which is quite sufficient to carry the narrative, being a bit slow to gear up.

However, Ray is an engaging character—and some of the secondary characters are even better. I'm not overly fond of the plucky kids (that's a personal dislike of the entire category of sidekick, rather than a dislike of how these particular characters are handled), but Ray's friend/sidekick, the ex-Navy SEAL who moonlights as a drag queen, is awesome enough to carry any number of books all by him/herself. And once the chase narrative kicks in, with Ray attempting both to solve Ian's father's murder and steal back the penis bones, the balancing act of a woman with too many deadlines rings very true.

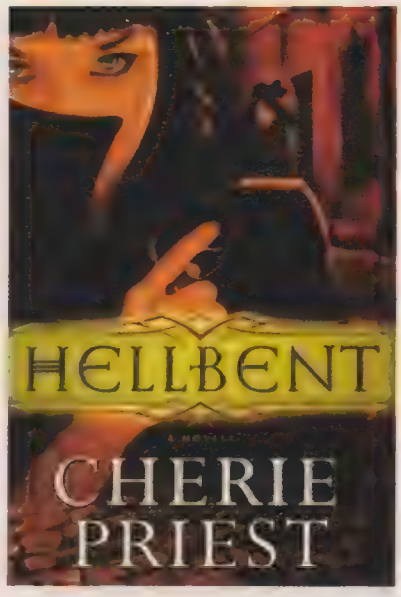
By the end of the novel, the meta-plot of the series has advanced a great deal, and our heroes are several monsters stronger and moving in on some answers regarding the torments suffered by Ian and others. I also thought Ray's solution to her political problems was a clever bit of rules-lawyering.

Ray's cheerfully sociopathic, and these aren't books to read if you're looking for a lot of moral compass or deep ethical conundrums. But Priest's gift for waving down from the top as she hurtles over it is manifestly in evidence here.

* * *

Kurt Russell makes his second appearance in ***No Hero***, the debut novel by Jonathan Wood **(Night Shade Books, trade paperback, $14.99, 264 pp., 978-1-5978-0282-6)**. This is a good first novel, coherently plotted and with a couple of nice twists, strongly reminiscent of but with a more slapstick take on Charles Stross's "Laundry" novels.

Wood's protagonist, police detective Arthur Wallace, is on the hunt for a mysterious serial killer who slices people's heads open with an impossibly sharp sword. Arthur wishes he were Kurt Russell. He's not, as we're reminded at least once per chapter—which did, I admit, get a bit repetitious.



But he is pretty charming in his own right.

Arthur's quest brings him to the attention of a chronically underfunded and ignored British government agency (MI37) that specializes in preventing the incursions of Lovecraftian horrors from beyond space and time into the soft and squishy continuum of everyday Earth. Sadly, they're not particularly competent, and not particularly well-respected within the hierarchy of secret government organizations.

Of course, they hire Arthur. And dump him directly into a series of crises with no training and less explanation.

I found that particular trope a bit irritating—the fish out of water story breaks down when exposed to logic in this case, and while I appreciate Wood's attempts to both keep the plot moving and provide natural opportunities for exposition, it did have the net result of making the protagonist group seem (often) too stupid to live. However, the bookish, battery-chewing, heroic Clyde is a thing of beauty, and I did enjoy the awkwardness of Arthur's attempts to pursue his love interest (another police officer) while bound by the Official Secrets Act.

One of this books greatest strengths is its monsters—the Progeny. They are suitably icky and implacable, and more than once gave me a pretty good squick. They also have the ability to infect just about anyone—a plot device that keeps the paranoia level high, as Arthur is never quite sure if any of his new friends might be under their control.

Like the Stross books, this is a narrative that revels in inventive weirdness and metatext. Magic is powered by electricity, which leads to various characters stuffing batteries into their mouths and doing OSHA-unapproved things with wall current. We have prophecy by psychotropic squid ink, ethical judgments undermined by later revelations, and a whole lot of mayhem. A good beach book, in other words—quick and playful.

Young Adult Fiction

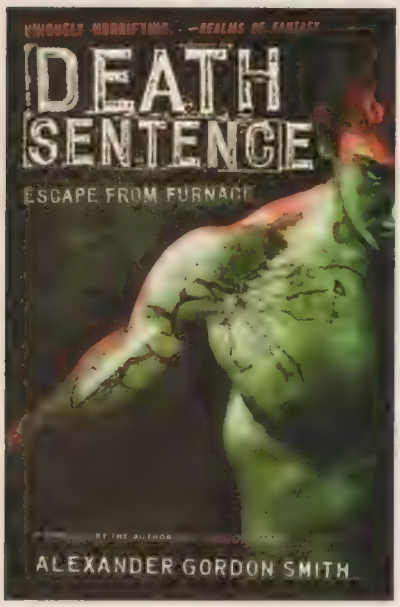
by Michael M. Jones

***So Silver Bright*, by Lisa Mantchev, Feiwel and Friends, hardcover, 368 pp., $16.99, ISBN 978-0-3123-8098-4.**

Beatrice "Bertie" Shakespeare Smith is on a quest to reunite her parents, the enigmatic Scrimshander and the tragic Ophelia, who've been separated by time and circumstance. With her suitors, the pirate Nate and the fairy Ariel, aiding her, Bertie enjoys a series of whimsical, fantastical adventures. She faces off against the sea goddess Sedna and enigmatic Queen of the Distant Castle, travels into her own past, and rescues a fire dancer, before ultimately returning to the Theatre Illuminata for the performance of a lifetime. Magic, love, family, and pies all collide in this gleefully imaginative tale of theatre and literature gone wild. A wholly satisfying conclusion to the series, and not to be missed.

***Death Sentence: Escape from Furnace 3*, by Alexander Gordon Smith, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, hardcover, $15.99, 272 pp., ISBN 978-0-3743-2494-0.**

After his repeated failures to escape from the nightmarish Furnace Penitentiary, Alex Sawyer is subjected to horrifying procedures aimed at turning him into a soulless killing machine. Struggling to retain his humanity, he makes a last-ditch effort to break free. But when Furnace's true origin and purpose is revealed, Alex is forced to make some hard decisions. Smith taps into cultural nightmares in order to deliver the most uncomfortably visceral installment of the series yet, as the story further spirals into claustrophobia, madness, and terror.



***Spellbound*, by Cara Lynn Shultz, Harlequin Teen, trade, 352 pp., $9.99, ISBN 978-0-3732-1030-5.**

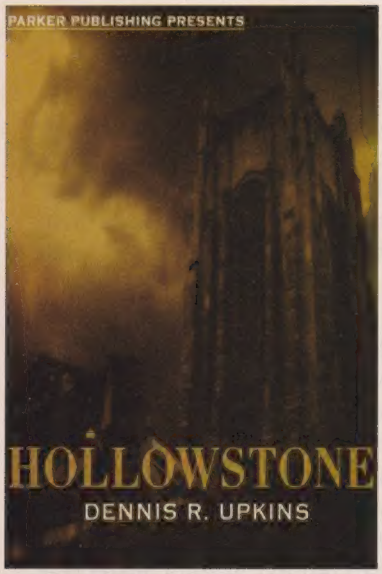
After her parents die, Emma Conner goes to live with her aunt in New York, reluctantly enrolling in an exclusive prep school, where she's treated like an outsider. She's irresistibly drawn to the rich, handsome, charismatic Brendan, who alternately returns her interest and ignores her. Soon the two learn that they're the latest incarnations of a centuries-old curse, and their love will lead to Emma's death. Their only hope lies in understanding the curse's origins and boundaries before tragedy hits yet again. While the resident villain's performance is over-the-top, it doesn't diminish the overall quality or entertainment value of this romantic thriller.

***Fairy Bad Day*, by Amanda Ashby, Speak, trade, $7.99, 336 pp., ISBN 978-0-1424-1259-6.**

Trained to spot and slay the elemental beings which secretly plague the world, Emma Jones was sure she'd be this generation's only dragon slayer, like her mother before her. Instead, she's tapped to hunt fairies, which are annoying but harmless. Then she discovers her family legacy is linked to an indestructible being of utter evil, and she's forced to team up with Curtis Green, the boy she can't stand, in order to save the world. This comedic adventure contains hidden depths, making for a fun if light-hearted read.

***Hollowstone*, by Dennis R. Upkins, Parker Publishing, trade, $12.95, 246 pp., ISBN 978-1-4635-0437-3.**

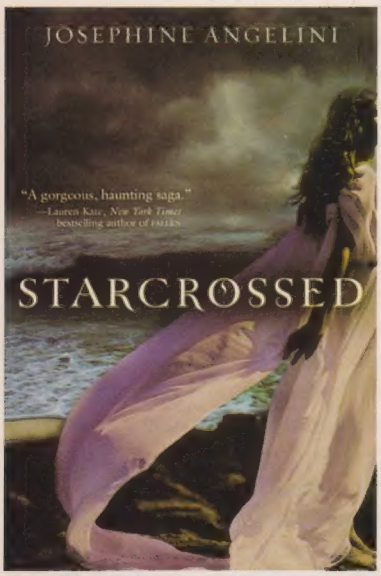
When Noah Scott wins a scholarship to the exclusive Hollowstone Academy, he enters a world of privilege and opportunity. As one of the very few black students, he stands out, but his roommate, the rich and popular Caleb Warner, helps him settle in. Soon, Noah is caught up in the academic grind and



entangled in the school's mysteries, scandals, romances, and intrigues. It all turns sour when Cal is killed but his ghost lingers. In order to solve Cal's murder, Noah must delve into Hollowstone's darkest secrets, which seem tied to a greater supernatural scheme. With its diverse cast of characters, myriad plotlines, and a callback to Fitzgeraldian sensibilities (evoking The Great Gatsby), this book tackles some heavy themes along the way. Unfortunately, a lot happens for the slim page count, suggesting that a more leisurely approach might have worked better. It's a strong debut, and Upkins shows lots of promise.

***Starcrossed*, by Josephine Angelini, HarperTeen, hardcover, $17.99, 488 pp., ISBN 978-0-0620-1199-2.**

When Helen Hamilton first meets Lucas Delos, she tries to kill him with her bare hands. Soon, she learns that she, like Lucas and his family, is descended from the Greek gods, blessed with superhuman abilities but cursed by the Fates to reenact age-old tragedies. Swept up in a complex conflict dating back to the Trojan War, Helen's growing friendship with Lucas and the understanding of her powers is threatened by those who'd kill her to fulfill a prophecy. A gloriously subversive twist on paranormal romances, this plays out like a feminine version of the Percy Jackson books, with just as much action and mythological inspiration to balance the emotional bits.



***Awaken*, by Katie Kacvinsky, Houghton Mifflin, hardcover, 310 pp., $16.99, ISBN 978-0-5473-7148-1.**

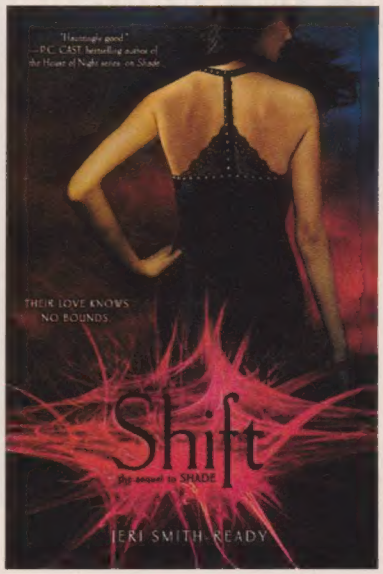
In the future, almost everything is done online, and everyday life is rigidly controlled, with legislation introduced to make digital school mandatory for everyone under eighteen. Maddie, whose father invented digital school, and who secretly yearns for freedom, meets Justin and his friends, who want to disrupt the system. Lured into acts of rebellion, Maddie is soon forced to go on the run, caught up in a movement far beyond her control, even as she falls for the unobtainable Justin. Clearly inspired by current social trends, this book offers an interesting message and a believable world, but sometimes comes across as preachy and overwritten.

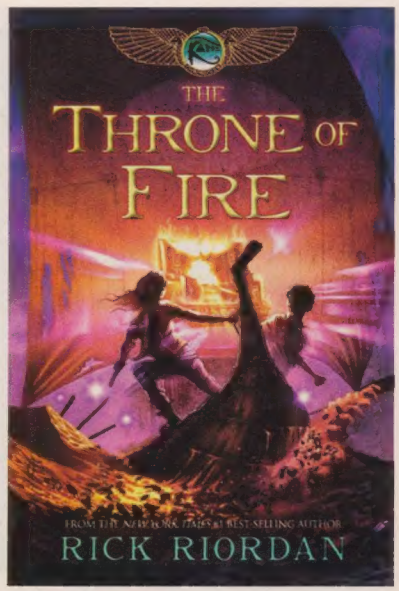
***Shift*, by Jeri Smith-Ready, Simon Pulse, hardcover, 367pp, $17.99, ISBN 978-1-4169-9408-4.**

Caught between her dead boyfriend Logan, now a ghost, and the living Zachary, to whom she's attracted, Aura is tangled up in a postmortem soap opera, in this sequel to Shade. Things get weirder when Logan momentarily returns to life, something no ghost has done before. Aura and Zachary redouble their efforts to unravel the secret of the Shift, the moment which altered the balance between the living and the dead, and which binds them in ways they never expected. Unfortunately, they're not the only ones on a hunt for the truth. With intriguing world-building and interesting characters, this supernatural drama is full of surprises, though it leaves much for the trilogy's conclusion.

***The Throne of Fire: The Kane Chronicles, Book Two*, by Rick Riordan. Disney Hyperion, hardcover, 452 pp., $18.99, ISBN 978-1-4231-4056-6.**

Having set up a school for magicians, Carter and Sadie Kane are working overtime to prevent the ancient god Apophis from escaping his prison and destroying the world. This time, their quest takes them across the world in an attempt to reunite the aspects of the sun god Ra. With rival magicians and evil gods standing in their way, and their own allies reluctant to help them, it won't be easy. They'll have to gamble with their souls and brave the Rest Home of the Gods in order to succeed. Riordan continues to reinvigorate and rework Egyptian myth and lore with his usual keen manner, delivering nonstop action and adventure.





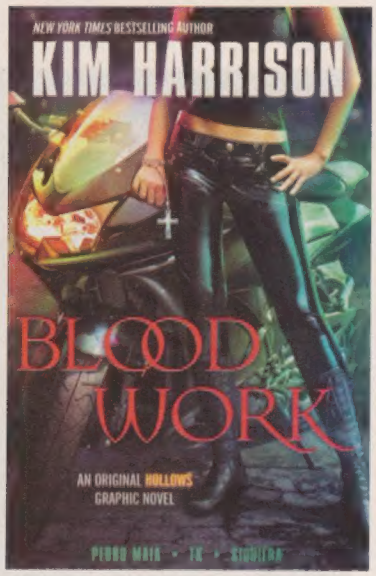
Graphic Novels

by Andrew Wheeler

This time out, I once again have two books with nothing in common, so I won't spend any time trying to make them cohere.

***Blood Work*, by Kim Harrison, illustrations by Pedro Maia and Gemma Magno, Del Rey, hardcover, 170 pp., $23.00, ISBN 978-0-3455-2101-9.**

Harrison's "Hollows" urban fantasy series—featuring Cincinnati's favorite witch, Rachel Morgan—has been exceptionally popular through nine regular prose novels, and now it's been expanded (following Jim Butcher and Patricia Briggs, among others) into graphic novel form, allowing Harrison's devoted fans to argue whether they think Ivy Tamwood really looks like that.



(Normally, I'd complain here about the credits—graphic novels are not "by" a writer and then "illustrated" by someone else; they're a collaborative work—but you'll have to take that as read, since I'm tired of saying the same thing so many times.)

This is Harrison's first foray into writing a script instead of full prose, and she does pretty well: *Blood Work* is slightly wordy, but Harrison keeps the narration to a minimum, and she's cleanly transitioned from the novels' first-person narration to an omniscient camera-eye here. As is usual for graphic novels based on urban fantasy series, this is a prequel, covering the first meeting of a very young Morgan and a somewhat older Tamwood (she's a vampire, after all; they don't *do* young). The two are thrown together in best odd-couple cop-movie fashion: Tamwood is ambitious and driven, with a tangled, complicated relationship with both her boss Denon and her master vampire Piscary, while Morgan is seemingly young, carefree, and unfocused.

In fact, the biggest complaint about *Blood Work* is that it *is* pretty derivative and predictable: Tamwood and Morgan are supposed to handle minor cases, but stumble upon a murder which Morgan insists on investigating; their partnership was deliberately engineered by Piscary, who all but cackles about it on the last pages; and Ivy's struggles with her blood lust crop up like clockwork, but never move the plot directly.

And, of course, this is all a prologue to the stories Harrison's fans have already read: they can learn some behind-the-scenes details and see their favorite characters in four-color action, but there are no real surprises here. On the positive side, the art is nice and energetic—and it holds together better than you'd expect from two pencillers, three inkers, and two colorists—and every other urban fantasy graphic novel is a prequel, too, so the audience must be used to it by now.

***The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Vol. III: Century: 1969*, by Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill, Top Shelf Productions, paperback, 80 pp., $9.95, ISBN 978-1-6030-9006-3.**

Alan Moore has written more great adventure comics than possibly anyone else alive—in a dazzling array of styles, from *Watchmen* to *From Hell*, and from *Swamp Thing* to *V for Vendetta*—so a reader has learned to give him time to spin his stories. However, we're now two-thirds of the way through the third major *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* story—after two excellent Victorian-era miniseries and the substantially quirkier and less successful hodge-podge of *Black Dossier*—and Moore seems to be running around in circles this time. (Deeply picturesque circles, true, with enough throwaway details to keep fans of mid-century pop-culture digging through these panels for weeks, plus lots of engaging, specific dialogue—but, still, circles.)

The first volume of *Century* was set in 1910 and saw Mina Harker with a mostly new League (retaining only her love, Allan Quatermain) chasing the unclear schemes of a nasty occult leader too-obviously based on Aleister Crowley, along with a side plot pulled bodily from Brecht and Weill's *Threepenny Opera*. Quatermain had been rejuvenated into a new, young body, and somehow lost all color and interest along the way—though I suppose that was compensated by the Harker-Quatermain relationship turning into a flexible triangle with the addition of the pansexual and occasionally sex-changing Orlando.

In *1969*, nearly sixty years have passed—with our League now reduced to that triangle, and clearly getting on each other's nerves—when

they return from their pseudo-utopian "Burning World" to London to chase after what they think are the two-generations-removed followers of that occultist. Of course it's not that simple, and of course they look and feel out of place. *1969* is the middle volume of a trilogy, which is always tricky, but it's full of "letters from Fred," in which the characters (particularly Mina) comment about how Victorian and out of place they are in Swinging London. O'Neill's art is sparkling and brilliant as always, and Moore's background details (the moptopped band called the Rutles, for example) are amusing and immersive—but his foreground characters, heroes and villains alike, are so obsessed with their own increasing age that there's no room for the actual youthful vigor of that time to shine through.

I would hate to think that the League only works well in Victorian times, but the evidence so far points in that direction—though Moore is not done with this story, and could still dazzle us all with a big finish in that coming third volume.

Gaming reviews continued from page 75

Younger players raised on later installments in the *Final Fantasy* series, which tend to favor style over substance, may find the random encounters and lengthy text conversations tedious, but this is a game that academic theses and HBO miniseries are meant for. It is a feast. Like the novels of Tolkien or Tolstoy, *Final Fantasy III* is a game that you can revisit over and over, and find new enjoyment with each playthrough. Fans never forget the game's great moments—the opera house, the phantom train, the end of the world—and neither should you. Whether it is your first or fiftieth time picking up the controller, buy this one today. 11 out of 10. **Reviewed by Matt London**

***Hunted: The Demon's Forge*, by inXile Entertainment, published by Bethesda Softworks ESRB rating: M, $59.99; formats available: Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 Format reviewed: PlayStation 3.**

While waiting for *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, check out this sleeper title from Bethesda Softworks—*Hunted: The Demon's Forge*. Take control of Caddoc the warrior and E'lara the elven ranger as they battle past hordes of spiders, skeletons, and other baddies.

Billed as fantasy combat for the *Gears of War* age, Hunted incorporates the popular battle mechanic of hiding behind cover. Each character comes equipped with both a sword and a bow, so players can pop up from behind cover and snipe enemies from afar, or leap over the barricades and get in close, hacking and slashing.

Players alternate between the two heroes while dungeon crawling. The character not actively under the player's control still fights under the AI and the player can guide the two characters to solve puzzles together.

Hunted utilizes a magic and abilities system that will be familiar to players of the *Dragon Age* series. The cooperative puzzles will remind players of *Resident Evil 4* and more recent 3D platforms. "You stand here on this pressure plate while I go over and push that statue." That sort of thing.

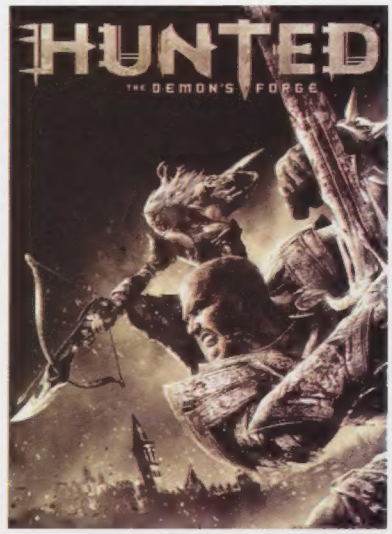
Just as in classic first-person shooters, nearly every opponent drops a weapon that can be picked up and used if players deem them superior. That said, most found weapons are inferior. The game encourages players to solve puzzles and navigate mazes to acquire powerful magical weapons which have unique special abilities. Picking up an enemy's gear becomes relevant with shields, which have a limited number of durability points and are always breaking. If you are careful about how you slay shield-toting enemies, you can replace your battered or shattered shield with theirs.

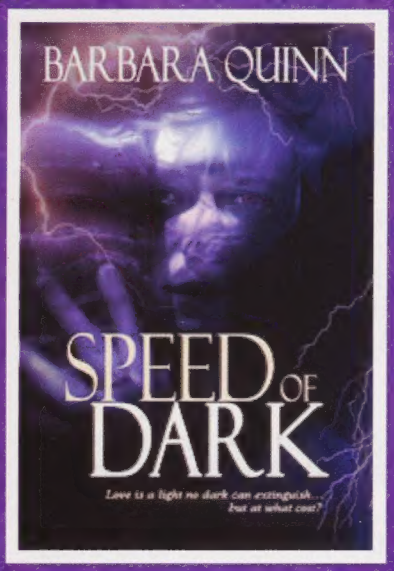
Despite these appealing features, Hunted falls short in a number of ways. Controls are often awkward and the game is very dark—visually. Many fantasy games these days feature copious gore and half-naked elves, but in Hunted players may actually have trouble seeing where they are going. Together, these problems make it almost impossible to navigate the game's winding subterranean caverns. I was forced to use a help tool that guides players to their next destination far more often than I would have liked. Battles are repetitive, and in rescue missions I had a lot of trouble locating the people I was supposed to save and the people who were shooting at me.

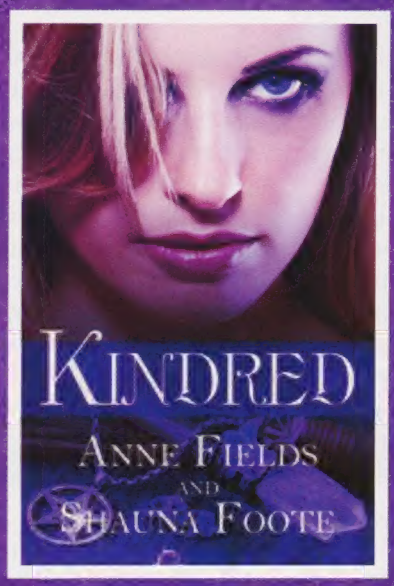
The plot is hard to follow in the game's early chapters, and the characters' motivations are revealed so slowly it was hard to care about their adventures. The story begins in medias res, which is a clever literary technique rarely implemented in video games, but the lack of introduction is primarily to blame for the confusion about the plot and characters.

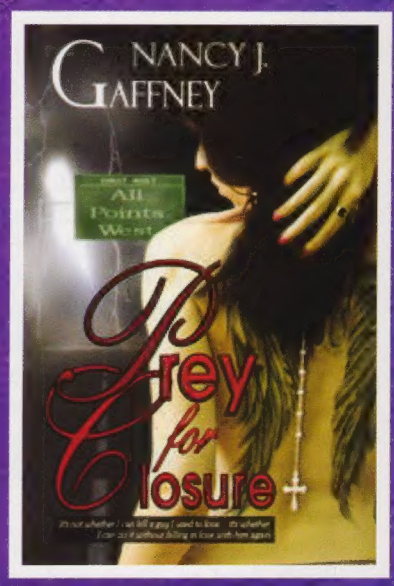
After several hours of gameplay, I realized my mistake. Enjoyment of Hunted hinges on having a friend to play it with. Rather than relying on the clunky AI, have a friend pick up Controller 2 and hack your way to victory as a team.

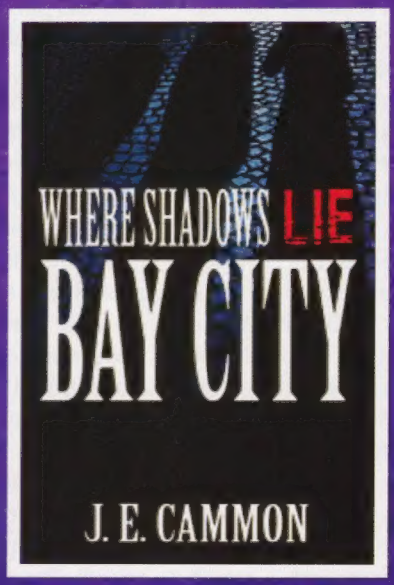
Although flawed, Hunted: *The Demon's Forge* fuses elements of a variety of games into one complete package, and as an added bonus, features Lucy Lawless as the voice of a leading role. And if Xena is onboard, it can't be half bad. 7 out of 10. **Reviewed by Matt London**

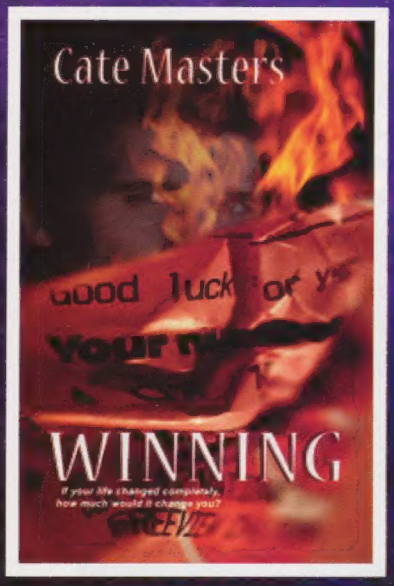












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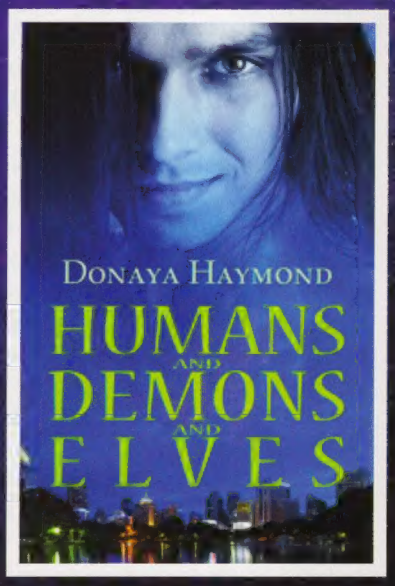

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